THE WORLD'S NUMBER ONE PC GAMES MAGAZINE

PC GAMER®

Warhammer 40,000: Three games, one epic war pg 56

Fallout: New Vegas hits the jackpot pg 64

COVER TITLES ARE CLICKABLE!

MISS ME?

DUKE NUKEM FOREVER
PC GAMER'S EXCLUSIVE ADVANCE PREVIEW pg 48

WoW: Cataclysm shows its dark side pg 20

The LEGO GPU! pg 94

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HOL 2010
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PC GAMER

HOLIDAY 2010

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PC GAMER®

#208 HOLIDAY 2010

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The utopia was ready—the golden domes polished and shining, the city's culture strong and vibrant. A smile danced across the leader's face; he stood proud, and prepared for the sweet taste of victory. Then, he heard the distant thunder; the unmistakable roar of un-killable elephant-tanks. They trampled his people, ate his museums and crapped on his cavalry. The leader wept.

Ready or not

Can you remember what you were doing in 1997? I can: I was scraping up enough cash to buy a Creative Labs 3D Blaster videocard with 4MB of RAM. It set me back the equivalent of a half-month's rent, but 3D Realms had just announced *Duke Nukem Forever*! I was going to be ready.

Well, 13 years later, *Duke Nukem Forever* is almost ready for *me*. My 1GB Radeon HD 5870 and I are primed, and judging from the three-hour wait at this year's PAX for a brief trailer and five minutes with the game itself, I'd say all the other Duke fans out there are ready, too.

Gearbox, despite being confident about *DNF*'s 2011 release date, isn't quite ready—for screenshots, at least. But when CEO Randy Pitchford invited *PC Gamer* to play parts of the game that no one else has even *seen*, we couldn't pass up the opportunity to tell you about it. So bravo to Gearbox and 2K for not freaking out when we showed up at their door with a professional court sketch artist to capture this historic occasion.

No similarly solution presented itself, however, when EA informed us that the copy of *Medal of Honor* we'd been given to review would only include the single-player campaign and access to the multiplayer beta, which was limited to only two maps, two modes and a dozen or so weapons—a fraction of what will be available.

As most of you already know, *PC Gamer* only reviews games when they're in a state that reflects the quality of the product that you'd receive buying the game online or off the shelves, and this wasn't up to our standards. As a result, we're waiting to receive access to the complete, unabridged *Medal of Honor* to deliver our official review. Hopefully, that won't take another 13 years (by which time I expect *PC Gamer* to be published from the balmy shores of Gliese 581g). Either way, we'll be ready.

LOGAN DECKER
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WHODUNIT

Evan Lahti
Senior Editor
Since he was a young lad, Evan's dreamed of the day he'd play *Duke Nukem Forever*. That day has come at last. See page 48!

Dan Stapleton
Reviews Editor
Fallout: New Vegas is here, and that means that, for all other purposes, Dan is not. Read his review on page 64.

Tom Francis
Section Editor (*PC Gamer* UK)
From pages 56 to 63, there is only war! *Warhammer 40K*, to be specific. Tom scored big new details during his visit to Relic.

Josh Augustine
Associate Editor
Josh knows *TOR*; Josh has played *TOR*. On page 79, he'll tell you why *Star Wars: Clone Wars Adventures* is no *TOR*.

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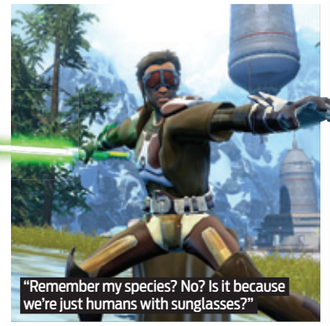
Your emails, Facebooks, Twitters, and yes, we still get the occasional letter

BACK CHATTER

- I love *Team Fortress 2* so much, and now my son is totally into it. ***Gabriel A. Candia***
- R.A.T. 7 mouse FTW! (Good luck finding one though!) ***Cliff Flaro***
- *City of Heroes: Going Rogue* just inspired my new hero/villain: Mama Grizzly! ***Rich Gonzalez***
- Every PC gamer should be bowing down and kissing Valve's feet. Steam is one of the things saving the platform. They've also got a track record of hiring talented mod creators, giving them a ton of money to build their project and then not just dumping them (like many other developers) once it's complete. ***Cory Rathbun***
- *DotA*? I just want Valve to get around to making and releasing *Half-Life 2: Episode 3*. That's all I ask. ***Tanner Gallella***
- Treyarch sold out PC gamers again; there's no Prestige Edition of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* for PC gamers. This is a sure look at what the support will be like for the game. ***Kris Johnson***
- I'm sad to leave Rapture, but Columbia could be a good change. ***Jacob Floyd***

Force fact-check

In your October cover story on space combat in *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, you had a small story on the Miraluka being announced as a playable race. However, the writer implied that the Miraluka were not just newly revealed as playable, but newly introduced to the canon as well, when they've actually been around since the *Tales of the Jedi* comic series in the early '90s. Even if you haven't been following the *Star Wars* expanded universe, you should recognize them as Visas Marr's race from *KoTOR II*! Honestly, people. I hope that was merely a miswording. ***Ruth Schmalenberger***



"Remember my species? No? Is it because we're just humans with sunglasses?"

Yes, master, it was a miswording. Please forgive... ack! guh! gasp! [death rattle] **PCG**

The Grand Unification Theory

I've seen many games in my time, but there's nothing better then stompin' on an AI or player in a 4X RTS. There are so many out there to choose from it's insane—from *Sins of a Solar Empire* to *Star Wars: Empire at War*—but none of them are the ultimate. I envision one that incorporates both land and space at the same time, zooming from a space battle to a land battle with no load time. Look at the *Supreme Commander* series and its Strategic Zoom. That's like, *almost* there. Imagine, for example, a new *Star Wars* game having the space gameplay of *Sins* and the ground play of *SupCom*. Think of how awesome it would be to watch your Star Destroyers bombard a planet, then zoom straight down to see it as it's happening while your Stormtroopers are storming (pun intended) a Rebel bunker. I would buy this game in a heartbeat. ***Antman9173***

Such a game would be awesome, but it'd be hugely ambitious, expensive and risky to make—which is why no one's done it. When you try to do two things at once, you may end up not doing either very well, so most developers tend to concentrate on making one focused game at a time. **PCG**

On OnLive

After reading the October issue Face Off where Evan and Dan talked about if OnLive should be considered PC gaming, I can understand why Dan says that if it doesn't have modding support and isn't able to run on high graphics settings it isn't PC gaming—but that's where I think he's wrong. I run all my games on low on a three-year-old laptop, and I don't always use mods; does that make me something other than a PC gamer? If OnLive gets new people to start using the computer to play games, then it will attract more players to PC gaming. Even with the OnLive Mini Console coming out soon, I don't think that's bad—it will get people who can't afford a PC or a console playing games. I hope to see more coverage on OnLive. ***Will Gilstrap***

My point about OnLive isn't that it's "bad," it's that it's a different platform which offers none of the features and options that distinguish the PC and make it my gaming platform of choice. If you like it, use it! It's just a different sort of animal, is all. **Dan**

THE HOT MAIL

Dissenting opinion

I know I'll get a lot of grief for this, but I'm not that impressed with *StarCraft II*! I'm not sure enough was brought to the table here. A lot of things have been implemented into real-time strategy over the last decade, such as death animations, but in *SC2* I can't find any flailing bodies flying across the screen like in *Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle-earth II* or *Age of Mythology*. Or when I launch a nuke—yup, still like a firecracker, with no land alteration. Even worse, there's no skill tree to climb with kills in multiplayer, like in *Company of Heroes*, and you can't build heroes to throw in the mix, as in Blizzard's own *Warcraft III*! I think Blizzard played it too safe and came out with the same game they had 10 years ago, with mediocre graphics now instead of poor! ***Jeff Shamburger***

We can't tell you you're wrong to not appreciate SC2's unapologetically old-school style, but we do have to take issue with calling its graphics mediocre—it's one of the prettiest RTS games ever made! **PCG**

A great letter deserves a great prize; that's why we're sending Jeff a copy of *Civilization V* in appreciation of his stellar correspondence. Look up top to see how you can get in touch with *PC Gamer* and earn your chance to win next month's PRIZE OF MYSTERY!

We do it for the kids

I would like to thank you for your amazing support of classic PC games. I'm only 14, and so many amazing games are completely lost to me. However, thanks to the fact that most of your editors absolutely love to talk about their favorite classic PC games, I have purchased several games I would never have considered otherwise, including *Half-Life*, *Fallout* and *Deus Ex*, all of which I found great. So *PC Gamer*, I beg you to keep loving all those old games and writing incessantly about them in your magazine. ***Tristan Spencer***

This month's classic: *Duke Nukem 3D!*

I beg you to keep loving all those old games and writing incessantly about them in your magazine.

Just try to stop us! (We'll just assume that your parents OK'd you playing those M-rated games.) **PCG**

Jolly Goodfellow

I read *PC Gamer* despite the fact that I don't really care for role-playing games, MMOs or RTSes. So what *do* I like? First-person shooters and (gasp) turn-based strategy. It's getting harder and harder to find quality TBS games out there, so thank you for adding Troy Goodfellow's "Tactical Advantage" column to your magazine—I am already looking forward to next month's column. ***Neal Irwin***

PRTSCN

I took this in *HL2: Lost Coast*. By looking at it you wouldn't think it was a scene from an FPS where you're about to go and blast the hell out of Combine forces! **Lee**
[from the PCGamer.com forums]

It's hard to believe this was taken from a game running on six-year-old tech (heavily updated, but old nonetheless). Valve, can we have the next Source Engine yet?

PCG

SHOW US YOURS Tell us your story with a great screenshot. Include PRTSCN in the subject line and you could win a sweet prize like Lee's new copy of *Civilization V*!

Stimulated by simulations

Thank you for the wonderful and long-overdue feature on simulations in the October issue. "The Realists" is a great article catering to us red-headed stepchildren, and it's about time you chased away Andy Mahood's loneliness. Sims truly seem to have fallen out of the mainstream, and the days of big boxes and thick manuals are behind us, but never have I seen so much passion exhibited by sim developers like I'm seeing today. And Tim Stone is right: never have they been so accessible. I have watched Neoqb's wonderful *Rise of Flight* go from a rocky start to an all-out magnum opus, manifesting the greatest World War I flight sim ever created, complete with emailed newsletters which are written with all the zest of a bunch of children returning from recess. It's this kind of enthusiasm by developers that keeps me coming back to simulations. And if that weren't enough, you included modding instructions for making *ArmA II* even more realistic! Surely my canteen runneth over. Thanks again for an outstanding issue. ***Edward Burton***

More *Torchlights*

I enjoyed reading "The making of *Torchlight*" in the September issue very much, and would enjoy reading more articles about other fledgling development houses like Runic. ***John H.***

Good to know we're on the same page! You'll see a lot more of these in the next year. In fact, my main mission at PAX was finding the most creative "fledgling" developers and giving them a forum in our magazine to show off their work! ***Logan***

If the *Torchlight II* genie grants wishes, we'll wish for even more *Torchlight*.

BACK CHATTER

Goodbye, epic intern Eric Belsaas! We shall miss reading your articles and listening to your *WoW* level progress every week on the podcast! ***Nathan Jedziniak***

Erik won't get away that easily—watch for his name in the mag and on PCGamer.com. ***PCG***

- It's a bummer when you realize that your PC is no longer able to cut it. But it is also exciting to know that you must begin gathering hardware for your new rig. ***Darth Adrian***
- I play a couple of military-style FPS games that are free to play. They are also free-to-get-your-a$$-kicked until you purchase armor and better weapons. Otherwise you unload your free gun's clip in some guy's back and then he turns around and pumps three or four rounds into you, and you're toast. However, I've found the answer: get a sniper rifle and always aim for the head. Works every time. ***Pred Head***

WHERE WE PLAY

Play on the official *PC Gamer* community servers

Team Fortress 2
66.151.138.34:27015

ArmA II
75.102.38.3:2332

Counter-Strike Source
207.210.252.63

Ventrilo (voice chat)
208.100.40.19:3796

ART of WAR CENTRAL

Our game servers are provided by Art of War Central, *PCG*'s staff-approved hosting service. Visit ***artofwarcentral.com***

MONITOR

THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD

Las Vegas
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DUKE NUKEM FOREVER

Minnesota
PUZZLE AGENT

London
BLUR

Moscow
METRO 2033

Russia
TETRIS

Japan
SHOGUN 2: TOTAL WAR

Oklahoma
PREY

New York
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North Atlantic
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Everywhere
CIVILIZATION V

Hollywood
THE MOVIES

Louisiana
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FALLOUT 3

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ASSASSIN'S CREED 2

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MEDAL OF HONOR

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LARA CROFT AND THE GUARDIAN OF LIGHT

Vietnam
CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS
REDACTED

Bolivia
BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY 2

Argentina
TOM CLANCY'S HAWX

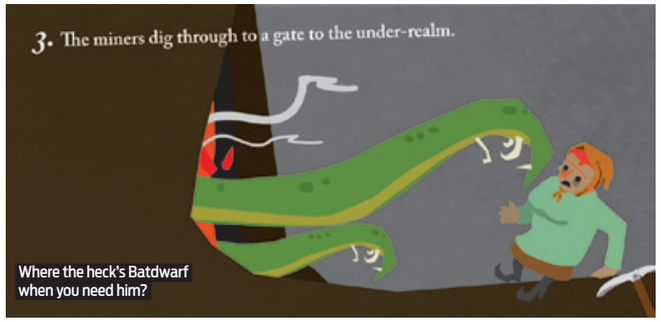
Africa
FAR CRY 2
RESIDENT EVIL 5

Rainbow
PEGGLE

Hot Spots

America's Heartland? Avoid. Vacation in Vegas? Think again. *PC Gamer* reports on a world ravaged by conflict, disease, nuclear fallout and those damn Templars

Aliens · Hazardous driving · Undead · Mutants · Fallout · Executives · Templars · Unrest · Gnomes · Crime · Gravity · Humans · Pegs



Where the heck's Batdwarf when you need him?

Dwarf Fortress illustrated

Bringing an extraordinary indie game to life

Dwarf Fortress is a brilliant but impenetrable game. It simulates the business of mining a mountain for metal and fun in merciless detail, but only represents the action in crude text characters. There's never been a game that so thoroughly warrants illustrating. Tim Denee is the king of this dark art: he tells the story of his punishingly difficult adventures in mining with appealingly crooked cartoon dwarves. They slay zombie snails, strike platinum, cultivate mushrooms and occasionally go mad.

In "Oilfurnace," his second story, even the process of mining is made inventive and clever. After one colony dies of thirst on route to the underground water level, and a second hits it and drowns, he comes up with a new approach: his dwarves mine down to the water level, then across, then back up, carving out a giant column of stone suspended by a flimsy wooden crane. Then he drops it. The rock plunges through the water and down to the stone beneath, giving him a clear column to mine through.

Dwarf Fortress' preposterous level of detail reliably creates amusing situations, but sometimes it takes something like one of Denee's illustrations to see just how hilarious it is.

One of his dwarves slew a giant bat, and became rather attached to a cape made from its hide. This is Batdwarf, who soon becomes one of the most powerful of the fortress guardians. Read it at *www.timdenee.com/oilfurnace*. ■ **Tom Francis**

A tale of dwarves, zombies, demons and digging.

APB CLOSED

RIP COPS & ROBBERS MMO GETS THE CHAIR

Realtime Worlds spent $100 million over the past seven years to create a crime-infested online world, and it took less than three months to die. *APB* shut its doors on September 23, after the game spectacularly failed to gain any critical or commercial support. The developer has closed, and publisher EA is giving free games to disgruntled customers. If you bought it, head to www.customersupport.ea.com right away to claim your compensation. **CP**

FREE STREAMING

BIG CHANGE ONLIVE LOSES THE SUBSCRIPTION FEES

If you wanted to try out the game-streaming service OnLive when it first launched, you had to enter your credit card number and sign up for a $15 monthly subscription just to login to the site. Now that's changed: just go to www.OnLive.com and create a free account, and you can instantly start playing demos. If you like what you see, *then* it's time to bust out the credit card to buy more permanent access. **DS**

NOW PLAYING

AT THE PC GAMER WEB STORE

Think about it: the internet could die tomorrow. Hackers could create a super-virus that brings the whole thing down, or mad scientists could unleash mutant beavers that would run amok, chewing through our precious network cables. So live for today—go to **www.pcgamer.com/store** and download games like there's no tomorrow.

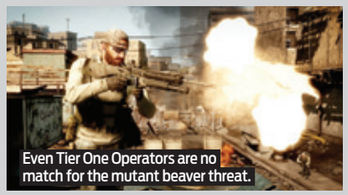
Medal of Honor

Sid Meier's Civilization V

Dead Rising 2

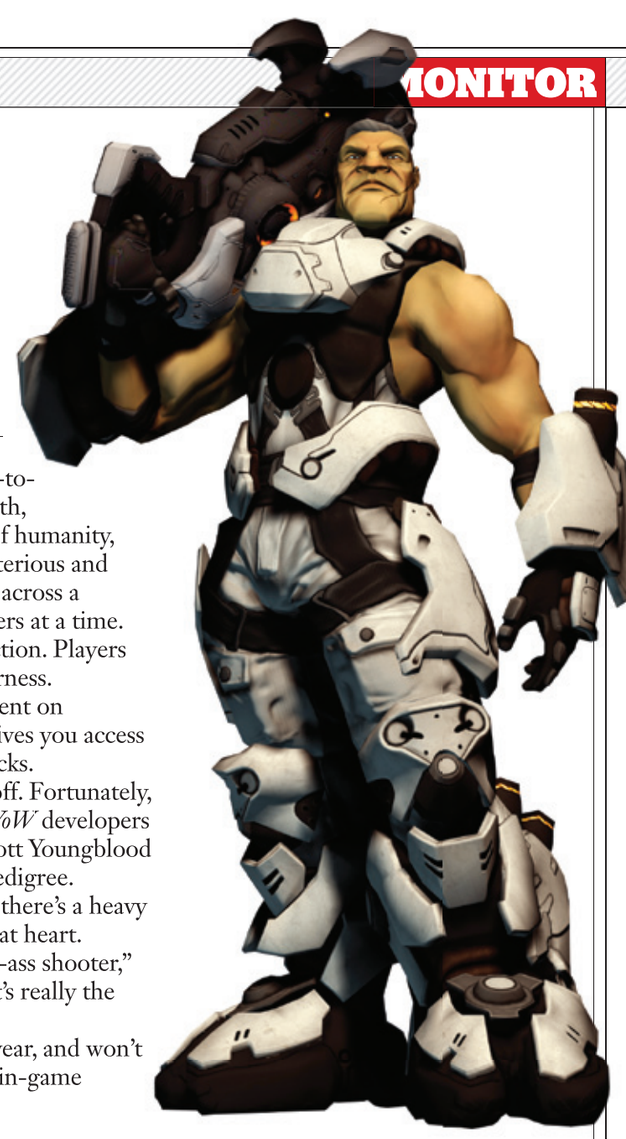
Darksiders

Mafia II


Even Tier One Operators are no match for the mutant beaver threat.

Jump into Firefall

Incoming: a hot-looking, free-to-play, *Planetside*-esque shooter



Dropping in from orbit, *Firefall* is a gorgeous free-to-play multiplayer shooter set on a devastated Earth, hundreds of years in the future. The remnants of humanity, mostly jetpack-wearing mercenaries, are battling a mysterious and deadly force known as The Melding. The war will rage across a persistent battlefield that will support hundreds of players at a time.

So far, we've seen only some small skirmish co-op action. Players will form five-man squads and go questing in the wilderness. Experience gained from these co-op missions can be spent on upgrading your Battleframe, a hulking mech suit that gives you access to special abilities such as healing fields and special attacks.

It sounds like it might be good, but difficult to pull off. Fortunately, it's in the works at Red 5—a company founded by ex-*WoW* developers Mark Kern and William Petras—and is designed by Scott Youngblood of *StarSeige: Tribes* fame. You couldn't ask for a better pedigree.

With persistent leveling and weapon customization, there's a heavy RPG element to *Firefall*, but it remains an action game at heart. "Really, what we're focusing on is trying to make a kick-ass shooter," says Executive Producer James McCawley. "We think it's really the next iteration, the next evolution of the shooter genre."

Firefall will be released as a free download late next year, and won't charge a subscription fee, relying instead on the sale of in-game items. We'll be following this one closely. ■ ***Tom Senior***

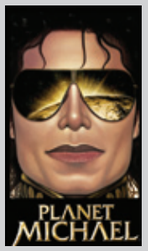
TRENDS

EASY-BAKE MMOs

Conventional wisdom says that you need millions of dollars and several years to produce an MMO, and hundreds of thousands of players to make money. But today there are frameworks available that give game makers the ability to simply hang some popular culture baubles off a tree and call it a licensed game. **CP**

Planet Michael

1 An MMO celebrating the life and times of Michael Jackson. Seriously. The idea is to give his fans a place to gather, do a few cooperative missions in music video-inspired settings, and of course listen to The King of Pop's greatest hits.



Star Trek: Infinite Space

2 Our sensors have picked up a new free-to-play browser-based MMO based on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. There are no details on how it'll play, but the show managed to get a lot of political and racial intrigue out of its stationary setting. German publisher Gameforge has hired *Star Trek*'s art director, Michael Okuda, so it'll at least have a strong visual connection to the source.

Sponge Bob Squarepants

3 Here's where our cynicism lightens up a little bit: Nickelodeon is building an online world based on the underwater cartoon. The potential for a kid-friendly romp with friends around the ridiculous world of Bikini Bottom, a place with a lot of character and potential for interesting NPCs, is actually pretty exciting—if the developers can capture the random wackiness of the show.

THE SPY

The Spy is living in electric dreams.

The last time The Spy had to digitize himself to infiltrate a mainframe, he snagged on an errant BitTorrent packet and got dragged into to a teenager's pre-release version of the *Wolverine* movie. Lost among terrible acting and missing special effects, The Spy knew hell.

Luckily The Spy has friends in sketchy places who were able to back-trace the torrent, uncover The Spy's location and speedily eject him from his cinematic hell. Aside from a missing byte, that if you look closely enough you can see glittering in Wolverine's claws at 1h04m12s, The Spy was fully restored, although it was a few weeks before he dared touch a computer again. So when The Spy had to digitize himself to infiltrate Linden Labs, the company that makes *Second Life*, he did so hesitantly.

Cyber sleuthing

What was important enough to send The Spy running headfirst at a wall socket in order to enter Linden Labs' mainframe? Linden Labs "entertaining offers" for their prized chunk of virtual real-estate.

In order to find out more, The Spy swan-dived into the server and bounced around for a bit. The firewall proved tricky, but nothing The Spy couldn't handle (he didn't like that suit anyway). Chatter on the secure side suggests Microsoft is eying the service. Why? Personally, The Spy would use it to blackmail all the perverts buying virtual penises, but clearly it's the idea of a virtual world supported by micropayments that appeals to Bill Gates' crew.

But why not something more stable? Why not make their own? Those are answers that The Spy missed out on, given that he was accidentally emailed to CCP. In a chain letter FWD. Oh, the ignominy.

Sexy, sexy roleplay

Those CCPers, the people behind *EVE Online*, are working on a non-*EVE* game, an MMO based around *Vampire: The Masquerade* called *World of Darkness*. It's about the political and social interactions of different Vampire castes, which is obviously an excuse for elaborate costumes and sexy, sexy roleplaying. "Bite me, oh Spy...no, not there. Lower...lower!" It's being built with some amazing character customization tools: The Spy's already eyed some flowing cloth, as well as strangely unnatural but still impressive hair tech that makes hair bounce and bob like each strand is a tiny bungee rope. At launch, the game will solely consist of Vamps, but there's the possibility of more races, such as Werewolves, to be added. The Spy could not ascertain how close launch is, but it's not likely to be before 2012.

> "He wants EA to re-release *Wing Commander* for free."

The Spy piggybacked an IM exchange to Paul Barnett, the man in charge of *Warhammer Online*, because he's always worth some industry inside knowledge. His latest project is attempting to get Electronic Arts to re-release the original *Wing Commander* for free, using DOSBox and his frightening natural enthusiasm. At the time, he'd already removed the DRM from the game and was pitching it to the higher-ups.

APB on the auction/cutting block

The Spy caught a ride on a rogue tweet and was beached on a random collection of bits and bytes that used to be *APB*. The MMO died a quick death after failing to gather fans, anywhere. But you don't make a pile of content like Realtime Worlds did without accruing some sort of value. There's a lot of potential in the server-side technology built to allow the game to grow its own servers when troubled by a budding population (if only)—and the game itself: three cities with tons of tech. There are eyes on the remains of the game, including Epic's, the Unreal Engine developers who spent a lot of time working with RTW, even helping with the game's PR. Then there's Webzen, who initially provided the money for RTW to develop *APB*, before RTW bought the game back from them.

At last, The Spy managed to find an open port on Logan's desktop, and squeezed out of the digital world unharmed. Spy out. ■ ***The Spy***

Massive Attack

A field guide to

TERA's wildlife

To know your enemy is to know how to exploit their weaknesses

Heed my words, young one. The wisdom of a Baraka, refined over generations and preserved at all costs, is not a gift a wise warrior would decline. My name is Obtumn and, if you allow me to, I will aid you.

The land beneath you is not what it seems. You believe it sturdy, physical—but it is naught but the runoff of two almighty titans' dreams. For millions of years the giants have slept, the contents of their dreams—and nightmares—recklessly spilling out into this world.

You are one such dream unleashed upon this landscape, and you will find others. I've encountered them all, and learned to defeat each of them in turn—as you must if you wish to survive here in the perilous land of nightmares.

by Josh Augustine

Legend

Bring allies · Defensive · Fights in melee · Uses magic · Social · Flees for Help

Not your typical fantasy MMO quest fodder.

DARK WIZARD

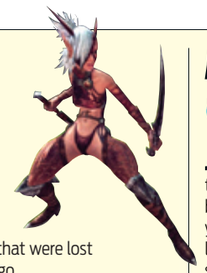
The first time I ever witnessed a group of different creatures working together was when I encountered a Dark Wizard herding a group of thralls. I ambushed them, and was surprised to find that the Wizard didn't bother to resist my attacks—he seemed unaffected by even my strongest blows while his minions swarmed me.

Then he calmly backed away, taunting me and insulting my combat abilities. He unleashed a wave of magic that slowed my attacks, and summoned another batch of minions for me to massacre. When I finally got close enough to fight him one-on-one again, he deftly rolled away. This is a true challenge for the hardy adventurer!

■ **TACTICS:** Their pride is their downfall—Dark Wizards tend to announce their intentions with grandiose speeches. Pay attention to the taunts and boasts and you'll always know his next move. If you can't take him down before he summons minions, focus on killing the minions first, then tackle the Dark Wizard's huge health pool.

■ **FINAL WARNING:** At some point the pathetic, mutilated creature will beg for your mercy. Do not grant it, for they are cursed abominations that prey on the weak.

DEVA

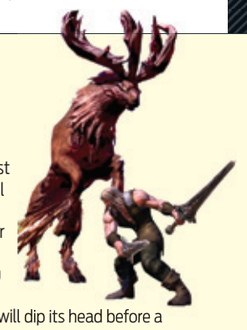


The Devas are an ancient race whose taste for empire still lingers in their blood, continuing to fight wars that were lost thousands of years ago.

■ **TACTICS:** Whatever a Deva *can* be, a Deva *will* be (at one time or another). These relentless, heartless killers are not bound by any code of honor. If they can distract you by flirting with you while another cuts of your legs, they'll do it without shame. You may accept their surrender, but do not believe it. It's just as likely that that was their plan all along.

■ **FINAL WARNING:** They will do *anything* to gain an advantage over you.

ARGASS



Although extremely territorial, the worst these relatively peaceful beast-spirits will do to you if you encroach their land is give you a nasty stare. That is unless you pick a fight with one.

■ **TACTICS:** An argass will dip its head before a quick antler attack (which is deceptively strong—it will knock you down). Get ready to dodge if it prances backward—it's readying its most powerful charge. Never stop moving while you fight one.

■ **FINAL WARNING:** The Popori use Argass as "food detectors" due to their impressive ability to sense intruders on their land. Avoid killing them if you do not wish to anger nearby Popori scouts.

KULKARI

Be wary of these well-trained, well-organized scrappers. Their appearance may be savage, but don't let that fool you: the Kulkari operate their armies on a high strategic level, training specialists—attackers, defenders and devious spell casters—much like our own races.

■ **TACTICS:** They are very aggressive. Be wary of shield bashes and charges when fighting up close, and when they step back and take a deep breath, dive or teleport out of the way—their dizzying spin attacks are difficult to defend against.

■ **FINAL WARNING:** Kulkari will quickly fortify any area they claim; neighboring farms and villages should ready their defenses for an invasion.

GHILLIEDHUS

These tree spirits emerge only to protect the forests when they're threatened, so if you encounter one it likely means that there is an even larger threat nearby.

■ **TACTICS:** They're much bigger than you, and will be eager to jab you with the twisted spikes on their elbows or wave their long arms to knock you down. But they are very slow, easily angered and led off-balance. Stay as far as you can from them, and focus on defense if you get trapped in close.

■ **FINAL WARNING:** I've heard tales of larger, more intelligent and highly aggressive versions of these spirits emerging. Let us hope that I've heard wrong.

KUMAS

Kumases are fat, angry bastards. Sure, they're technically elemental demons, but what matters is that they hate everything and kill innocents for fun. Many good Barakas have fallen before the blind rage of these *chakma-los*.

■ **TACTICS:** All of its attacks share one weakness: they're aimed forward. Keep to the sides and rear as much as possible, exhaust their strength, then hit them hard when they sit to rest.

■ **FINAL WARNING:** They care nothing for reason; they are chaotic, seeking only destruction.

CROMOS

Great agility, exceptional cunning and two large fang-filled mouths make the Cromos one of the most vicious predator-scavengers. They will travel long distances when hunting their prey—and they'll eat just about anything.

■ **TACTICS:** Ironically, the Cromos' weakness in combat is its single-mindedness. Hit it hard early to break up its attack routine, which will leave it confused as to what to do next. Beat it while it reconsiders its plan of attack.

■ **FINAL WARNING:** A single Cromos is as powerful as lesser beasts are in packs.

DARK MARAUDER

I wish I knew more of the Dark Marauders. They're a mysterious lot that tend to congregate near sites of power; race or affiliation of the occupying forces is irrelevant.

■ **TACTICS:** Expect to be surprised. Their agility will catch you off guard, your sword will not sink into their flesh as far as it should, and their magical spells will alarm you. Attack from a distance, and incapacitate them whenever possible.

■ **FINAL WARNING:** All Dark Marauders whom I've encountered share two qualities: proficiency in magic and unapologetic selfishness.

I don't even want to know where they hide the buzzsaw body parts they throw.

DISC REAPER

It took me far too long to notice this creature's peculiar biology. At first glance, it appeared a distorted soldier with a strange walk, but as I got closer I realized that it was not a pair of legs that were underneath the giant saw blade at its waist at all. The abomination was two top halves of a soldier fused together at their waists. I recoiled at the sight—and luckily so, because right then the blade of its partner (as I've found they always travel in pairs) flew in front of me.

They have no culture, no habitat and no societies. They are just mindless abominations creeping into our lands from the darkest corners of the Titans' nightmares.

■ **TACTICS:** There is no safe distance from creatures that throw spinning, buzzsaw-like body parts. Get in close and hit them hard and fast. Focus on taking down one of a hunting pair early—that's one less monster that can run to get help. These horrors never give up the chase after smelling blood.

■ **FINAL WARNING:** Disc Reapers are unnatural and disturbing. For the sake of your sanity, avoid them if you can; destroy them thoroughly if you cannot.

Restart Right

Cataclysm's only a month away, and players old and new are chomping at the bit to explore the new Azeroth—proven by *WoW*'s record 12 million subscribers last month. Blizzard's cranked up the quality with the two new races being added in this expansion—but which one's right for you? We tally up the reasons to go Goblin or roll Worgen and let you decide ***by Andy Salisbury***

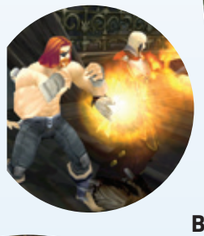
RECLUSIVE

Whether they're terrorizing London or hanging out with Edward Cullen in the *Twilight* movies, Lycanthropes never fall out of style—they're the big, hairy monsters that we've all grown to love. And now, *Warcraft*'s primal race of humans-turned-Werewolves, the Worgen, is being forced out of the old-timey city that'd been its home and stronghold for generations—and they're pissed off about it.

But you don't start furry: for your first 14 levels, you'll play through the experience of a human survivor witnessing your people's fall to the Worgen curse and invading undead armies. These are darker stories than we're used to seeing in *WoW*, but it's not all sorrow and weeping—times of war bring some sweet weaponry and the opportunity to do some seriously crazy stunts.

WORGEN

Commit genocide
When Worgens invade your city, you save the day by blasting the hairy-tar out of 'em.



Bust some shackles
Activist or terrorist? Doesn't matter—The only man who can save your city now is locked up, so break him out!

Blow up baddies
Some enemies are simply too tough to kill with blades, so bust out the dynamite!

Go hunting
The Worgen-infected are often hiding in plain sight. Employ a dog's keen nose to track 'em down.

Transform!
You may be able to hide in your human form out of combat, but the second you smell blood, your animal instincts take over!

GOBLINS

Roll hard
Goblins know how to ride in style; when you join their ranks, you get the keys to your very own hot rod. Fire it up, make sure you've got a good lawyer, and roll out.

Be fraudulent
Short on cash? Just burn down your home and collect the insurance money. Genius!

Use rocket boots
Sure, they may scorch the carpet, but if you cared about silly things like "flammability warnings" and "safety," you wouldn't be a Goblin!

Magma-fy islands
Dormant volcanoes are just explosions waiting to happen! It'd be rude to *not* set them off.

Dress sharp
You wouldn't show up to your posh pool party in those dirty old rags, would you?

EXPLOSIVE

When life gives lemons to a Goblin, he doesn't make lemonade. No, no, no—that Goblin rigs those lemons with explosives, hurls them into a dormant volcano, and then goes skateboarding off a cliff. Goblins have been accused of many things—such as housing explosives in plastic flamingos or drilling for oil more recklessly than BP—but no one has *ever* accused Goblins of being boring.

The Goblin starting experience is unlike anything *WoW* has offered before, and if there's any reason for jaded MMO players to revisit Azeroth, this is it. Whether you're in it for the money, the fame, the ladies or just the sweet, sweet satisfaction of detonating a bomb large enough to destroy a small country—pack your bags, you're going to Goblintown!

CoHO gives you the entire original *CoH* single-player campaign for free. Download it right now!

Free war

Company of Heroes Online comes with free strategy, free campaign and free beatings

Company of Heroes' relatively slow-paced territory-control gameplay is a fantastic alternative to fast-and-furious games like *StarCraft II*, and its detailed WWII graphics and unit animations made it one of my all-time favorite real-time strategy games. It continues to impress four years after release.

Now, in the *Company of Heroes Online* open beta, all of that is free to play—with a few key differences. There's a metagame where you have a persistent commander profile that levels up and gains abilities like artillery strikes and calling in reinforcements, and you can equip slightly more powerful hero units and stat-boosting upgrades with a limited number of "charges" before joining a battle. When an item runs out of charges, you pay to recharge it with either earned in-game cash or the real thing (after launch)—and that's where *CoHO* will make its money.

Mortar fire—things that go *boom!* in the night.

The gameplay in *CoHO* is virtually indistinguishable from the original game. Balance, though, is another matter. Case in point: playing as a specialized German defensive commander against an American airborne player, I was handily defeating him. I'd captured all three of the victory points (VPs), and the American's score dwindled from 500 down to 50. A few more seconds, and it'd be over.

Suddenly, half of my infantry squads were dead, and he'd captured a VP. How? I watched as he assaulted the next VPs, and what I saw made me feel totally helpless.

In *CoH*, one of the Americans' abilities is to call in strafing runs from fighters that devastate infantry. Smoke flares appear on the map, and a few seconds later that ground and anyone dumb enough to still be standing there is raked by high-caliber machine gun fire from above. *CoHO* has that same ability, except it's upgradable—allowing a commander to reduce the time between flares and bullets to the point where escape is impossible. If the enemy could see my men, they were basically already dead. He'd also built up anti-tank infantry, which quickly shredded my now-undefended armor. Game over.

A pro player *might've* been able to counter this by spacing out his troops to limit casualties and denying the enemy munitions points, but for the more casual crowd that a free-to-play RTS is likely to attract, this kind of inequity will leave gamers feeling burned. With napalm. Granted, *CoHO* is still in open beta and balance is in flux, but the problem with earnable upgrades in an RTS game is that anything worth working toward is, almost by definition, going to create balance problems. If you feel yourself getting frustrated with online play in *CoHO*, the good news is you can always play against the AI. **DS**

Heroes can be earned in battle, or bought off the shelf.

Matchmaking needs work; this "even match" is very one-sided in terms of upgrade equipped.

Even at four years old, it's still one of the best-looking RTS games ever made.

War is your specialty

You can have four commander profiles, each leveled up separately to unlock powerful (and sometimes overpowered) abilities

AMERICAN:

Infantry
Specializes in calling in artillery bombardment, off-map reinforcements, heroic charges and stealth.

Armor
Equips high-powered tank rounds, brings in instant, heavy reinforcements and allows light armor to capture territory.

Airborne
Someone up there likes you. Airborne calls in aerial recon, paratrooper drops, bombing and strafing runs and supply drops.

GERMAN:

Terror
Disrupts enemy commander abilities by lowering enemy morale, calling down V2 rocket strikes and bringing in King Tiger tanks.

Blitzkreig
Gains resources by killing enemies, triggering emergency manpower boosts and calling in stormtroopers and rocket barrages.

Defense
Builds Flak 88 turrets, sets reactive artillery to bombard when enemies enter a zone, and conceals troops for a deadly ambush.

NFSW OPENS ITS ROADS

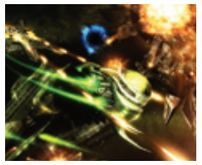
PLAY FREE CRUISE LONGER, FASTER

Gamers who dove into the free version of *NFSW* at launch ran into a roadblock at level 10 that kept them from some of the game's most advanced maps and fancy cars. No longer—EA has opened up all of the launch content to everyone (players who bought the game received a few cash shop items and an EA game as a thank-you gift). Exotic car rentals and power boosts are still available in the cash shop. **JA**

PUBLIC SPACE BATTLES

GROUP *JUMPGATE*'S EVENT QUESTS

NetDevil divulged more information on the Event Sectors system of their upcoming space sim MMO, *Jumpgate Evolution*, revealing them to be a sort of hybrid between *Aion*'s Abyss combat and *Warhammer*'s public quest system. Event zones will be controlled by AI enemies when they open, and the two player factions will have limited time to achieve objectives in the zone to gain rewards. They will be tailored to faction lore, and accessible only during random, short periods of time. **JA**



HOW TO STEAL THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS IN *EVE* MONIES

EVE Online player "Bad Bobby" (his name should've been enough warning) recently walked away with 850 billion ISK in assets stolen from in-game investors—the equivalent of $45,000 in *EVE*'s in-game currency! A brilliant mastermind to some, a cold-hearted crook to others, he managed to outwit other capsuleers (*EVE*'s term for players) in what was designed by other players to be a safe investment fund. And you can, too! Just follow his five simple steps:

1. ***Build trust*** by running small, but ever-growing, legitimate investment initiatives.

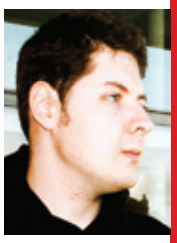
2. Once trusted, ***launch the game's largest investment fund*** with four honest trustees.

3. After accumulating massive wealth in the fund, suggest adding additional trustees and ***start a vote to create new shares.***

4. Instead of distributing them, ***keep control of all of the new shares yourself.***

5. Now the majority shareholder, you have full control of the fund and can ***run away with all of the assets*** (you bastard). **David Perry**

DEV MAN TALKING



Paul Taylor is the joint managing director of Mode 7 Games, an indie studio based in Oxford, UK. He's currently working on *Frozen Synapse*. His favorite terrible movie is *Lethal Tender* and his favorite frequency is 120Hz.

Most reasonable people on this forlorn little planet are willing to accept that games, through interactivity, offer unique opportunities for immersion.

Immersion and narrative are often thought to be one and the same, but I believe achieving real immersion is really about every element of a game working in harmony; it's something that seems to be ebbing away from game development as feature lists bloat and franchises are built.

I've recently been replaying one of the most immersive games ever made: Chris Roberts' original *Wing Commander*. It's often held up as a great example of storytelling, but there's quite a lot more going on than just a simple space yarn.

Consider the opening: you crash and burn in the training simulator and are asked to enter your name; immediately after this, you're transported to the bar of your base ship, the Tiger's Claw. Now, we've seen similar "home base" or hub-type structures in countless games since, but there's a certain elegance to this one: the simulator reminds you of the consequences that might befall you on a "real" mission, and the other characters in the bar will be at your side in combat. Your actions will have implications for the future.

Wing Commander's immersive strategy wasn't just a few gimmicks thrown together, either—everything was designed to keep the player within the world. The copy of the "ship's magazine" bundled in the box, the fact that the story adapts and continues even when you lose a mission (rather than forcing you to replay it until you win), the offhand comments made about the state of your ship when you arrive back at base—all this and more convinced you of your significance within the world. It's no wonder that developer Origin Systems' slogan was, "We create worlds."

Stay on target

I think there's another key lesson in *Wing Commander* for today's developers, and that has to do with focus. Modern action-roleplaying games tend to offer the player a vast array of options and opportunities to interact with the game world, but in doing so they often lack this all-important quality. In *Mass Effect*, for example, the player can do everything from micromanaging armor to negotiating with powerful leaders—Shepherd is a kind of one-person armed intervention.

In my opinion, creating a world relies not on a huge range of opportunities, but on the suspension of disbelief. This is often best accomplished by *limiting* the actions available to the player. *Wing Commander* made me feel like I was the pilot of a space fighter by allowing me to perform *only* actions appropriate to that role.

> "Games which are short on story tend to be the most immersive."

How many strategy games have you doing things like managing a budget, building bases *and* figuring out your troop formations? In the desire to be feature-rich and let players do everything and anything that they could want, the actual role that's being played is completely diluted.

I believe this is why some games which are very short on story tend to be the most immersive: they create a defined focus for the player. This isn't intended to be a criticism of certain kinds of game design (I do love *Mass Effect*, despite not feeling particularly immersed when playing it); it's more a call to developers to start thinking about the player's *role* more specifically.

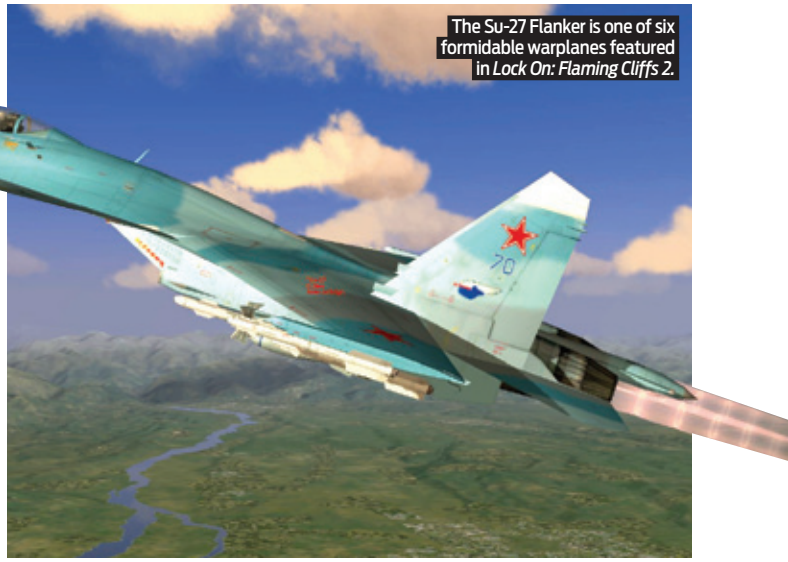
It's not always fun to be the center of attention; sometimes the real immersion happens when you're made to feel like a cog in a much larger machine. ■

Only a space fighter pilot would talk to a shot glass.

IN SIMULATION

When not picking Russian ground targets with his *Lock On: Flaming Cliffs 2* Collector's Pack, **Andy Mahood** has also been playing *Rise of Flight*, *DCS: A-10C Warthog* (beta), *iRacing* and *Microsoft Flight Simulator X*.

Nothing adds potency to your gaming desktop like a fleet of armed-to-the-teeth aircraft. I've worked industriously to keep my PC's hangar full over the past few years, but an ongoing jet sim famine has forced me to adapt to games like *DCS: Black Shark* (choppers), *Rise of Flight* (spindly World War I biplanes), *Falcon 4.0: Allied Force* (aging F-16 study sim with the liver spots to prove it) and a not-ready-for-primetime beta of Eagle Dynamics' *DCS: A-10C Warthog* to fuel my ongoing ground attack and dog-fighting urges.



The Su-27 Flanker is one of six formidable warplanes featured in *Lock On: Flaming Cliffs 2*.

Expand and conquer

While waiting for *A-10C* to take flight, however, I recently scooped up a new Eagle Dynamics release that should keep me contentedly airborne for months to come. *Lock On: Flaming Cliffs 2* is the company's second expansion pack for Ubisoft's 2003 *Lock On: Modern Air Combat* study sim (the first *Flaming Cliffs* expansion hit retail in 2004). It may not boast all of the next-generation enhancements we're expecting to see in *A-10C*, but it does deliver full multiplayer connectivity with *DCS: Black Shark* and some additional wrinkles that'll appeal to anyone interested in a modern jet combat experience.

If you're not familiar with the original *Flaming Cliffs* expansion, the Russian-built *Lock On* add-on fixed numerous bugs while adding radar and avionics enhancements, three aircraft-specific campaigns (featuring over 75 missions), new seasonal terrain textures and improved flight and damage modeling for each of the sim's featured aircraft (A-10A, F-15C, Su-27, Su-33, MiG-29 and Su-25). A remarkably detailed Su-25T anti-tank plane—featuring optically-guided anti-armor missiles and laser-guided bombs—completed the impressive package.

Pretty targets

Flaming Cliffs 2 evolves the franchise even further by transferring all of its predecessor's player-controlled aircraft to the same Digital Combat Simulator (DCS) environment featured in *DCS: Black Shark* and the upcoming *DCS: A-10C Warthog*. This terrain area includes a large chunk of the former Soviet republic of Georgia with improved terrain graphics, more ground objects, larger forests and higher-resolution elevation data. *FC2* also features an updated graphics engine, a fresh graphical user interface, additional player campaigns and a new mission editor (with a trigger system for scripting actions and events).

> **"Jet fans can now strap into the cockpits of six modern warplanes."**

Long-suffering jet sim fans can now strap into the cockpits of six modern warplanes and afterburn, bomb or strafe their way through some impressive looking *DCS: Black Shark* scenery while also enjoying full online connectivity with the 2009 Russian attack helicopter sim. The realism level can be as advanced as you want it to be, and the flight model fidelity is as authentic as anything you'll find on the modern flight sim market.

You'll need a copy of the original *Lock On* game to install *FC2*, but that CD is available from online vendors like www.lockon.co.uk and www.fighter-collection.com for as little as $10. The expansion itself is $30, but you can purchase a Collector's Pack—which includes *FC2*, the original *Lock On*, a massive 55-inch by 41-inch tactical wall map of the entire Western Caucasus region and a superb 307-page spiral-bound game manual—for the bargain price of $75.

Brief and debrief

As I sat back planning combat air patrol missions and bombing sorties for my F-15C Eagle and Su-25T Frogfoot, studying missile loadouts in the wonderfully thick and informative manual and noted ingress/egress challenges on my table-sized navigation chart (my wife won't let me tack the damned thing to the wall), I was transported back to an era when A-list flight sims delivered one of the most compelling and intense experiences on the PC gaming landscape.

It was an enjoyable journey. ■

ALTERNATE LIVES

Desslock is awed by the power of his new Alienware PC,. *Dragon Age: Witch Hunt*, *ArmA II*, *Crysis*, *The Witcher* and *Nehrim* (an *Oblivion* mod) sure do look pretty on it.

Since you grasp this holiday issue in your hands, hopefully those enchanting sugar plum fairies are dancing in your head. But I'm still focused on the more simple-minded enchanters contained in *Witch Hunt*, the most recent downloadable content (DLC) for *Dragon Age: Origins*, and I feel like I've received a lump of coal in my stocking.

Out of the box, BioWare's massive RPGs take hundreds of hours to thoroughly explore, so DLC that only offers a couple more hours seems superfluous. Roleplaying DLC only *really* works if it offers a sizable, stand-alone adventure that's independently rewarding. By that standard, most of the *DAO* DLC fails miserably—they're each only a couple of hours' worth of linear jaunting through recycled locations and uninspired hack-and-slash encounters, and they contain ruinously unbalancing loot that makes you all but invulnerable to enemy attacks. They're pale shadows of *DAO* because they're largely missing the tactical battles, roleplaying choices and fantastic characters that were the original game's strengths.

> **Most of the *Dragon Age: Origins* DLC fails miserably.**

Downloadable disappointment

Ignoring *Stone Prisoner*, which was an integral part of *DAO* that was only turned into DLC to penalize second-hand purchases, the best mini-expansion is *Leliana's Song*. It features a familiar character in a stand-alone adventure that feels complete. *Golems of Amgarrak* is too short, but it also offers a purposeful adventure that doesn't feel like a facade to bestow overpowered loot. *Witch Hunt* is very short, too easy and doesn't answer many questions, but at least it offers some surprising closure to your relationship with its featured companion. *Darkspawn Chronicles* is a novel experiment in roleplaying as vermin, which is less entertaining than you might hope. *Return to Ostagar* is short and pointless, but allows players to purchase another opportunity to nab the original game's pet. *Warden's Keep* is the worst of the bunch, since it's primarily notable for its intrusive NPC solicitations and charging for the permanent storage that should've been free.

While the dialog is respectably written and well voice-acted, it's terser, less eloquent and offers very few conversation branches compared to the main adventure. I wish it wasn't included at all because of the creative restraints its cost imposes—without voice acting, maybe we could've had lengthier and more open adventures, stocked with more than a handful of characters. The *DAO* toolset is so powerful that the BioWare-produced DLC should've offered far larger adventure modules that told complete stories and offered more inspired locations, encounters, characters and creatures.

It's difficult to enjoy even the best of these bite-sized gaming sessions because RPGs require some investment. You need time to become acquainted with the world's characters, settings and development systems, and you have to experience the consequences of prior choices. In a way, playing an RPG requires you to go on a journey that's similar to the one your alter-ego undergoes. Even if you've played an RPG extensively, it's difficult to just pop back into it months later and understand what's happening and how it works. You can muddle through, but you may not feel as rewarded by accomplishments if you can only faintly recall the obstacles you overcame to achieve them. Even if you were to save the DLC until you're ready to play or replay the original game, or if you pick up the upcoming, all-inclusive Ultimate Edition, the added magic items are far too unbalancing to integrate well into the original campaign.

None of it, other than the full-sized *Awakening* expansion, offers a good value. Perhaps BioWare is waiting for the sequel to unveil more substantive adventures. You should wait for the sequel, too. ■

Overpowered loot (such as the Helm of Honnleath) turns you into a god, making battles as much fun as stepping on ants.

TACTICAL ADVANTAGE

You build an army and march it toward your first enemy. He's expecting you to come knocking, because that's how this kind of game works, and his army is waiting. Your forces collide in a forest, not too far from the enemy capital. The battle menu pops up.

Do you zoom in to command your troops yourself, or push the auto-resolve button and skip to the scorecard?

Intrusion or entertainment?

Many strategy games try to mix a strategic level (where you raise taxes and build armies), with a tactical level (where you command infantry, tanks and/or spaceships on the battlefield and eliminate enemies one at a time). Developers have been trying to create a unified game from these two modes at least since 1994's *Lords of the Realm* (with one foot on either side of the fine line where macro meets micro). Few games have really done justice to the dual-layered design because it requires creating goals, objectives and AI for two very different styles of play.

The junction between the strategic and tactical layers is the place where the auto-resolve becomes an attractive nuisance for game designers. They know that part of their fan base prefers to play the strategic level and skip over the tactical, but if players think that they can rush through the game by ignoring the combat, then the developers will have spent huge piles of development money and resources on a mode that players avoid at all costs. If you *do* invest in developing a tactical battle engine for your strategy game, you need to give the player a reason to fight the battles himself.

Master of Orion II remains the unrivaled champion of this design—building your custom fleet gave you something to look forward to in every new encounter, turning every meaningless battle into the debut of a new ship.

Moron major general

More recently, the *Total War* games have become the modern example of a two-layer strategy game. Battles between gloriously-animated armies are the franchise's big draw, and Creative Assembly markets the games almost entirely on how good the battles look with thousands of units on the screen. Drawing us in with spectacle works, for a while—everyone plays every battle in their first few sessions with a new *Total War* game.

The problem with the *Total War* battles, of course, is that the enemy AI is weak. If the combat isn't challenging, then the illusion that you're making life-and-death decisions vanishes, and that killer enemy army stack becomes an easily routed speed bump as you plow onward.

> "The romance of history is still on the battlefield, not the cabinet room."

That's better than facing no opposition at all, though. In *Elemental: War of Magic*, the boring tactical battle mode is made doubly pointless by AI enemies who are unwilling or unable to create an army that poses any kind of threat. You advance on the capital with a horde of archers and knights and run into the enemy Sovereign and four of his closest friends. Without even the beautiful mayhem of *Total War*, there's no incentive to watch him die as you take his kingdom.

The challenge

The big challenge with inserting the tactical into the strategic is keeping the game flow going. Sid Meier rejected the idea for *Civilization* because he thought the constant eruption of battles would intrude on the experience he wanted players to get—the grand sweep of history. If there is to be tactical combat, it should never distract from the main event.

That said, this type of blending pre-dates *Civ* and will continue into the future. In its ideal form, it's about holding the fate of a country in your sword hand and turning the tide with a single well-timed charge. The romance of history is still on the battlefield, not the cabinet room.

We are nowhere near that ideal form, of course. So for now I'll stick with auto-resolve. ■

In Stardock's *Elemental: War of Magic*, you oversee your kingdom and serve as its general.

Troy Goodfellow blogs about strategy games at FlashofSteel.com and hosts the podcast *Three Moves Ahead*. He thinks AI generals learned their skills from Custer movies. Troy is now knee-deep in *Patrician IV* and *RUSE*.

FACE OFF

Should you be a beta tester?

Yes Playing pre-release games lets us sample safely and makes the final product better for everyone.

No Playing a beta can ruin your appreciation for the final, polished product.

EVAN: Betas aren't bad for you. If anything, I see them as a growing arm of the wealth of free content (browser and indie games, trials and an increasing number of free MMOs) we have available to us as PC gamers today—far more than any other platform. What've you got against free samples, Dan?

DAN: I don't think betas are bad, but I think they have the potential to hurt your gaming experience. First impressions are very important, and a shaky beta can quickly spoil your excitement about a game that you've been anticipating for months or even years.

You get some instant gratification and "I played it first" bragging rights, but the reality is that you're playing a work in progress. You'll usually see ugly placeholders and graphical glitches, suffer frustrating gameplay bugs or imbalances and endure crashes galore. Once you've got that bad taste in your mouth, you'll never completely wash it out.

Our favorite recent betas: *StarCraft II*, *LEGO Universe*. Our least-favorites: *Elemental: War of Magic*, *Medal of Honor*.

EVAN: While developers aren't charity organizations that we should go out of our way to help, the feedback gathered from pre-release versions is valuable. In-house testing can only do so much to get a multiplayer game ready for launch. In the case of *StarCraft II*, Blizzard needed months of data and thousands of active users to simulate server strain and balance the game. Betas are part of the conversation we're allowed to have with developers.

DAN: Someone has to do it alright, but it *is* something of a dirty job. You brought up the *SC2* beta. In it, testers were playing a game with plenty of exploits, due to unfinished unit balance, which led to frustrating losses. Testers also had to re-learn their strategies every time a patch shuffled abilities around, and their match histories were wiped, erasing any record of their past victories. There was frequent Battle.net downtime, there were crash bugs and the graphics weren't even final. Compare that to the experience of someone who bought the game on launch day: a much more stable, prettier, better-balanced game, with no bitter memories of getting burned.

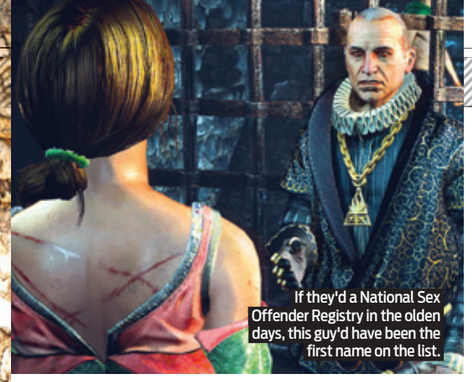
EVAN: There's definitely a set of players that want to keep their first experience with a game as pristine as possible. And I'd never discourage someone from protecting their experience with a game; it's a sacred thing. But the players who are the most passionate about a game are often the ones who can offer the best feedback (aside from insane forumites). Take *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*—with some hubris, Infinity Ward didn't produce a beta for the game on any platform. At launch and for the months following, the online environment was rife with hackers and exploits—a pair of dual-shotguns was so unbalanced that I stopped playing completely. Could some of these issues have been avoided with a beta?

DAN: Certainly—again, thorough testing is essential for any game, and multiplayer games in particular. But gamers need to be aware of what they're signing up for. Even though some betas can be fun, a beta invite isn't actually a ticket to a free game. There's a reason quality assurance testers get paid: this is work, not play, and you're signing up to do it for free, without so much as a dollar off the price of the finished product as a reward. ■

After losing all his money in a Finlandian lobster cage fighting ring (R.I.P. *Señor* Pinch), Senior Editor **Evan Lahti** exclusively plays betas.

Forget alphas and betas, Reviews Editor **Dan Stapleton** only plays deltas, mus and omegas.

This time, the fighting system looks great.



If they'd a National Sex Offender Registry in the olden days, this guy'd have been the first name on the list.

To torch, or not to torch?

Transformers: the medieval edition.

"How about you and me blow this joint and set it on fire?"

THE WITCHER 2 ASSASSINS OF KINGS

NEW INFO Geralt returns to sneak or bash through a new adventure

Many of you liked *The Witcher*, a supernatural roleplaying game. You liked it for its gritty world of poverty and racism. You liked it for its deep moral choices. You liked it for not being *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

But I hated it—for its controls, its dull, hours-long beginning, its leaden writing and its overt, crass sexism.

So why am I so excited about *The Witcher 2: Assasins of Kings?*

In the presentation the developers show me, the first game's returning star, Geralt, is being held in a castle dungeon, awaiting execution for reasons that aren't explained. Two guards are standing outside the cell, berating him. Luckily, like medieval Marty McFlys, they can't resist a taunt. Geralt tells them to come and say it to his face, girlfriend, and they enter his cell to rough him up. Using his supernatural monster-killing power of badassery, he breaks their heads. (Naturally.) The new fighting system looks great, the camera moving in close behind Geralt as the punches connect with a genuine weight to them.

READ ME
PUBLISHER Atari
DEVELOPER CD Projekt RED
LINK http://bit.ly/tw2aok

Geralt tells them to say it to his face, girlfriend, and they enter his cell to rough him up.

The developer playing decides to approach his escape stealthily, and so swiftly downs a potion that enables Geralt see in the dark and spot enemies through walls (like *Batman: Arkham Asylum*'s detective vision in a bottle). After sneaking up on and knocking out a few more guards, a cutscene introduces us to another battered-and-bruised prisoner. This prisoner's mother was killed by the guards, and he's out for revenge.

The direct approach

Rewind. Geralt is back just outside his cell. A second developer takes over. He's not interested in any of that sissy stealth stuff, and so chooses to escape using brute force alone. Grabbing a sword from one of the fallen guards, he ignores the shadows, skips the potion and starts slashing heartily at anyone who comes near him. The armed combat looks like random flailing, but I'm told that it isn't finalized yet.

This time, Geralt climbs into a different prisoner's cell and finds a woman tied up and topless. After freeing the prisoner, Geralt looks away as she covers herself up. It's an uncomfortable moment as a viewer: exploitative, and more than a little creepy. Thankfully, other people thought so, too, and CD Projekt RED has already pledged to change it. The original *Witcher* took justifiable flak for the misogyny of its collectable sex cards, and the developers are determined not to make the same mistakes again.

In conversation, we discover that this is the mother of the man we met on the last playthrough. This time, she's alive and her son is dead. We don't know the circumstances that led to this change of events, but the point here is to show how each game of *Assasins of Kings* can be made drastically different by your choices. In the action that follows, an ally within the castle distracts the guards, allowing Geralt and the grieving mother to make a subtle escape.

Rewind. We're back with the injured orphan son. He's too weak to walk, and there are no allies around this time. Geralt moves ahead, clearing a path by stabbing dudes, then returns to carry the son on his back. When they reach the exit, Geralt sets him down, and the prisoner commences burning the castle to the ground.

It's hard to tell from such a short demonstration how much of an impact you'll truly be able to have on the story as a whole, and whether the branching choices will really impact the game in a meaningful way. When the prisoner begins to burn the building down, does that mean when you return later it'll be a ruin? I'm not sure, and I'm taking a lot on faith. But from everything that's been shown, *The Witcher 2* appears to be fixing the most glaring faults of its predecessor, and creating an enormously dynamic RPG.

Eternal war

Now fast-forward. The developers want to highlight one more element: large-scale battles. In the scene we're shown, Geralt is standing in a field. The ground is on fire, smoke blots out the sky and all around, soldiers are fighting. It is, in short, chaos. The developers explained that the area was cursed, and that all of the men fighting here are actually ghosts, repeating a battle that happened long ago.

But there are monsters between the ghosts that *are* real, and they really don't take too kindly to you. On a giant throne in the midst of it all sits their leader, a creature built from the debris of the battlefield; smouldering bits of trebuchet, spears and broken shields combine to create his hideous shape. The monster orders the archers to fire, and hundreds of flaming arrows appear in the sky above you. Then the monster turns into a tornado. Nice. ■

Graham Smith

Release SPRING 2011

BASTION

HANDS-ON The genre becomes self-aware! The walking, talking dungeon-crawler

"Proper story is s'posed to start at the beginning. Ain't so simple with this one. Now here's a kid whose whole world got all twisted, leaving him stranded on a rock in the sky." Thus begins *Bastion*, an isometric indie RPG. But the narration doesn't stop there—it describes every significant task you perform. You begin in bed. You stand and, "He gets up." You begin to walk and, "He sets off for the Bastion, where everyone agreed to go in case o' trouble." I feel like I'm playing *Diablo* while a very Southern gentleman watches over my shoulder.

When you start towards the door, nothing lies beyond it but a long drop. You're on an isolated platform, floating in the sky—but as you approach, new segments rise from below and smoothly position themselves in your path. You never have to slow down: wherever you go, the world constructs itself around you.

When you come across the game's first weapon, the narrator deeply intones that the player, "Finds his life-long friend just lying in the road." Pick it up and, "Well, it's a touchin' reunion." The voice becomes slightly more rare as you progress, but when it's there, it's your guide, providing motivation and context, and smoothing over the cracks in the game's fantasy.

These two features—the narration and spontaneous world-building—make *Bastion* something very special, even in a genre that's becoming competitive again in the post-*Torchlight* era.

After making your way through your crumbling hometown and finding its inhabitants turned to stone, you reach the meeting point at the Bastion. There's only one person there, though. "He finds me," says the narrator. He's got a cane, a black moustache and grey hair. He's a bit dreamy.

The Bastion itself is a series of floating platforms that act as your hub for the rest of the game, and you can place buildings on it to assist your journey. There's the Forge, where you'll turn found items into weapon upgrades; the Arsenal, where you'll manage your death-dealing inventory; and the Distillery, where you can purchase power-enhancing elixirs.

I have no idea what lies beyond the next portal, but if it has half as much style as what I've played so far, *Bastion* is going to be great. ■

Graham Smith

READ ME

PUBLISHER TBD

DEVELOPER Supergiant Games

LINK www.supergiantgames.com

Release SUMMER 2011

Release Meter

It's that time of year again: The 2010 release section has shrunk down to a fraction of this list. 2011 is going to be a great year—it hasn't even started yet, and it's already so packed that we couldn't even fit huge games like *Diablo III*, *Duke Nukem Forever*, *Battlefield 3*, *XCOM* and *Guild Wars 2* on here because they'll be coming later in the year. Oh wait, we kind of just did.

Q4 2010	
Call of Duty: Black Ops	Activision
Create	EA
Company of Heroes Online	THQ
DeathSpank	Hothead
LEGO Universe	Warner Bros.
Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit	EA
Tom Clancy's HAWX 2	Ubisoft
World of Tanks	Wargaming.net
Star Wars: The Force Unleashed II	LucasArts
World of Warcraft: Cataclysm	Blizzard

Q1 2011	
Assassin's Creed Brotherhood	Ubisoft
Brink	Bethesda
Crysis 2	EA
Dead Space 2	EA
Deus Ex: Human Revolution	Square Enix
DC Universe Online	Sony Online
Dragon Age 2	EA
Driver: San Francisco	Ubisoft
Frozen Synapse	Mode7
Homefront	THQ
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	Ubisoft
Jurassic Park: The Adventure Series Games	Telltale
Portal 2	Valve
Rock of Ages	Atlus
Stronghold 3	SouthPeak
TERA	En Masse
The Sims Medieval	EA
The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings	Atari
Two Worlds 2	DreamCatcher
Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War II—Retribution	THQ

Q2 2011	
Darkspore	EA
Bastion	TBD
Dungeons	Kalypso
EVE Online: Incarna	CCP
FEAR 3	Warner Bros.
Red Orchestra 2: Heroes of Stalingrad	Tripwire
Star Wars: The Old Republic	LucasArts
Sword of the Stars II: Lords of Winter	Paradox
Torchlight II	Runic
Tropico 4	Kalypso

Q3 2011	
Batman: Arkham City	Warner Bros.
RAGE	Bethesda

WHO WANTS SOME?

PC Gamer's exclusive, off-the-record hands-on with **DUKE NUKEM FOREVER**

I finally realize the absurdity of what I'm about to play. It's the game that the gore-crazy, Shrink Gun-loving teen inside me has dreamt of since Duke's mushroom cloud-mirroring shades gazed upon me from a Michigan Walmart's magazine rack. Back then, I never imagined that I'd have to go to the trouble of getting a job *writing* for *PC Gamer* to actually play *Duke Nukem Forever*.

Among our original, Nov. 1997 feature story's bold predictions: "We're not fortune tellers, but we have every confidence that *Duke Nukem Forever* will be one of the biggest—and perhaps the best—titles of 1998."

I turn off of Highway 101 at exit 458, Nave Road. I'm mere miles away from where the code for gaming's most-mocked vaporware is being held—2K Games' bunker in Novato, California. The story gets more preposterous: 2K and Gearbox, the developers that picked up the *DNF* torch when 3D Realms faltered, aren't ready to release any screenshots of the game. At all. Even after letting thousands of the gaming public have a crack at it at the Penny Arcade Expo in Seattle last September, there's now a vacuum-sealed lid on new information. That won't do *DNF*'s notorious reputation any service—how am I supposed to produce a cover story about the game I've been waiting more than a decade to play without any visual evidence that it exists?

I find the parking lot. 2K HQ is nestled in a former military airfield, bunkered in renovated hangars. I'm about to sit down for the strangest hands-on article I've ever written. Weeks ago, when our team agreed that we wanted *Duke Nukem Forever* on our cover for a third time, Editor-in-Chief Logan Decker pitched an insane backup plan: if screenshots were forbidden, what if we wrangled a professional courtroom illustrator to capture scenes of *DNF* while I played it?

ILLUSTRATIONS: SUZANNE RACHEL FORBES

Duke Nukem

Football with aliens

We've executed that insane plan, and I'm met at the hangar by our artist, Suzanne Forbes. Suffice it to say, this is the first time I've been drawn while playing a game. Charlie Sinhaseni, 2K's senior PR manager, sits me down in front of the demo shown at PAX, and I'm speeding through the first stage. When we last saw our hero in *Duke Nukem 3D*, he was spitting missiles at a Cycloid at the 50-yard line of a stadium. *Forever* begins by recreating that same scene in its engine—the one-eyed cyborg is still three stories tall, stomping in the end zone of the Las Vegas Detonators football stadium. The giant's splayed, metallic hands rotate like blender blades, steadily kicking out rockets.

(Across the table, our illustrator is sketching at a breakneck pace, rendering my missile blasts and bunnyhops on paper nearly in real-time.)

It's immediately clear that what I'm playing isn't quite "modern" in design—my weapons don't have ironsights ("Duke is more of a 'shoot from the hip' kind of guy," Sinhaseni remarks when I mention their absence), and a steady pat-tern of circle-strafing, holding down the left mouse button to hose the enemy with missiles, and occasionally sprint-dodging produces a victory. Duke punts the animal's eye through the uprights in celebration.

The opening level's showdown on the gridiron is a brilliant bit of self-aware fan service, but mechanically, it's anticlimactic: I just killed an unchallenging tower of hit points that occasionally charges at me like a bull. But the Duke fanatic in me is actually a little happy that this gameplay feels regressive: would *DNF* really feel like a Duke game if it was stuffed with modern mechanics like co-op, physics puzzles or time-manipulation gimmicks? It's a sign that 14 years after *Duke 3D*, *DNF* is a comedy-first experience—that identity is infinitely more valuable to me than playing as another shaven-headed space marine.

Domestic Duke

I am inside Duke Nukem's house.

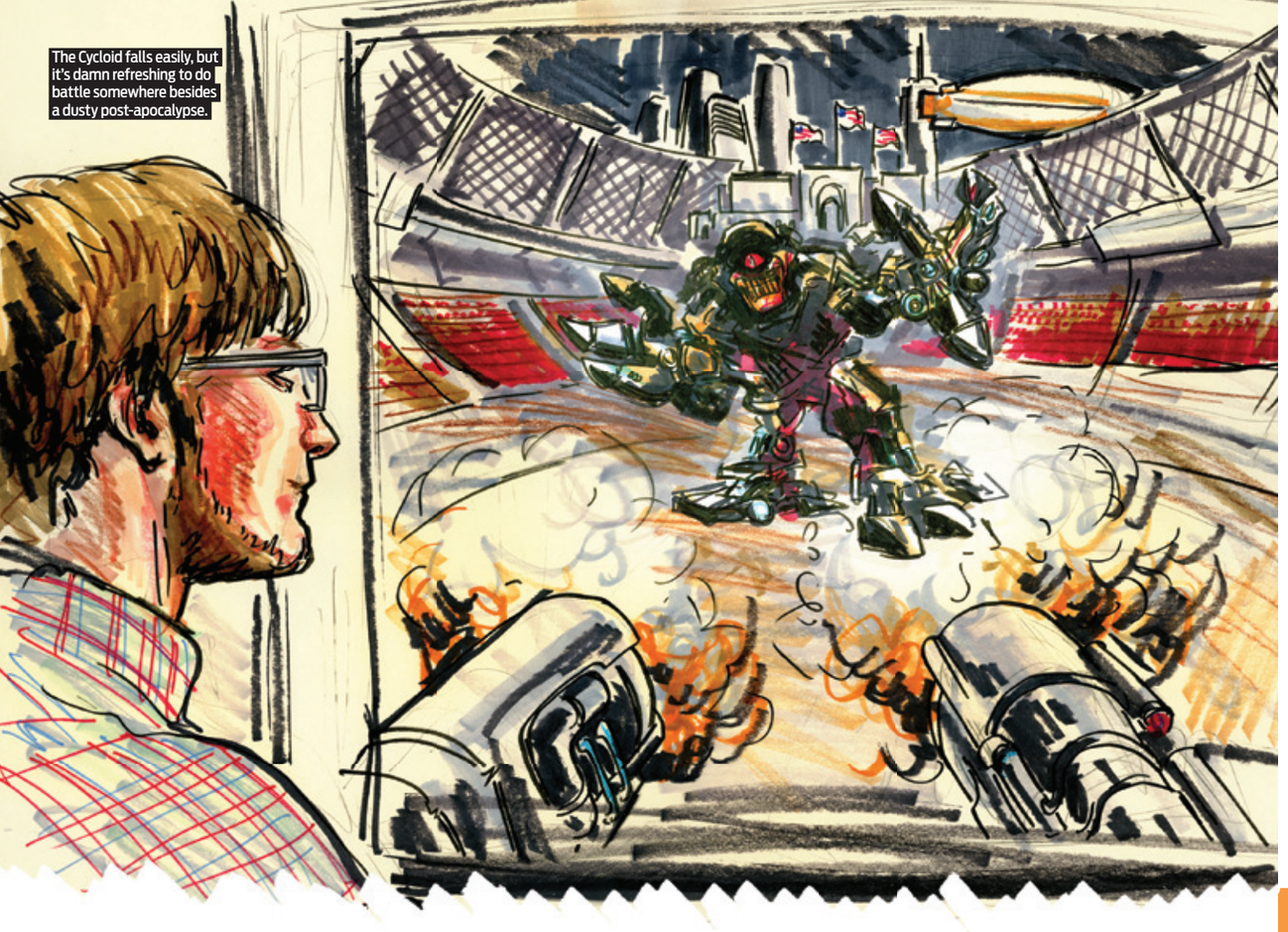
The opening stage against the Cycloid was a fourth-wall-breaking ruse—after Duke scores a field goal with the beast's eyeball, the camera pans back, showing the level I'd just played as an image on a TV screen, and I see Duke's hands holding a gamepad in front of me. The joke's on me: I was playing as Duke in a videogame...who was playing himself, in a videogame.

"Real" Duke is killing some time before his appearance on the "Damn, It's Late..." show, hosted by Johnny Lenoman—the condensed parody of late-night TV hosts Gearbox has created. As Duke lowers the gamepad, twin Britney Spears clones are revealed kneeling in front of Duke. I wasn't the only one playing with Duke, apparently. Giggling, one asks how Duke enjoyed the game. "After 12 #&$@ing years, it better be good," he mutters in the familiar voice of Jon St. John, the voice actor who portrayed him in the original.

Duke gets up, and I get to freely roam his luxurious abode. This section is an interlude, a design technique for renewing tension with a few minutes of downtime for plot or puzzles between battles. In a *Call of Duty* game, it'd take the form of some elite

Years later, *DNF* is still a comedy-first experience—that identity is infinitely more valuable to me than playing as another shaven-headed space marine.

2K Games' senior PR manager, Charlie Sinhaseni, babysits my playtime inside Duke's lavish house-palace.



The Cycloid falls easily, but it's damn refreshing to do battle somewhere besides a dusty post-apocalypse.

military man rambling on about how the Russians got their hands on plot-destroying nuclear EMP satellite-bombs; in *Mass Effect*, it'd be me checking in with my crewmates to see if they're sexable yet; in *Left 4 Dead*, it's reading graffiti on a wall.

I've always favored *Duke Nukem 3D*'s approach to downtime more: its lulls between gunplay were generous areas packed with humor that always felt like an extension of your own curiosity and a direct reward for exploring. Jetpacking into a strip club, discovering on your own that you can hand money to dancers, *then* figuring out that you could gun them down to retrieve your cash—that was the opposite of blindly feeling at the walls, jabbing at the spacebar in the hope that a secret would be revealed.

In its day, *Duke 3D* was practically a never-ending Easter egg—an infinite matryoshka doll of parody and pottymouth. I wade in Duke's house as long as I can to make sure I soak every secret up: leaving the rec room (with a pond-sized bath embedded in the granite floor) to wander down a hall lined with busts of—who else—Duke. This isn't as much a home as it is a series of shrines to himself. The corridor is lined with portraits: Duke playing football, Duke atop Everest, Duke's visage painted Warhol-style, a tuxedoed Duke gripping two Emmys, Duke floating in space in an astronaut suit, Duke posing before a pile of sharks he beat to death in the ocean. His ego is clearly intact: even the ancient pottery bears his crew-cut likeness.

In the main room, a floor-to-ceiling window overlooks the heart of Las Vegas. The Paris Hotel, the Bellagio and other landmarks are in view—and so is a miles-wide hovering alien spaceship, looming over Sin City. Centered in the room is a familiar sight: a pool table. Duke's dames look on, vapidly making fun of me as I struggle to pot all the balls. The minigame hasn't changed from its last appearance in *Duke 3D*'s "Red Light District" level, save for actual physics—which accurately simulates my awful pool skills. Sinhaseni has to pry me away from the minigame—why do I care so much about a perfectly ordinary game of billiards? It's a small testament that *Duke Nukem*'s context makes you care about its content—if I don't hear every obscenity and track down every pixel of nudity, I feel like I haven't succeeded.

Why so serious?

"When you're done, don't skip through to the next level—I'll lose my job," Sinhaseni pleads. I weigh the pros and cons for a moment, but comply. I don't get to see where Duke's off to in Las Vegas (but my interview with Randy Pitchford on the next page hints at what follows).

Instead, I'm warped ahead to a Nevada canyon, 14 levels later into the game. I'm rolling down the freeway in Duke's vehicle of choice, a monster truck stamped with the atomic emblem, dodging explosive barrels lobbed by humanoid warthogs on steroids.

In its day, *Duke Nukem 3D* was practically a never-ending Easter egg—an infinite matryoshka doll of parody and pottymouth.

Like the opening battle, this sequence is light, unchallenging gameplay.

The highway ends suddenly as an alien dropship strafes it, creating a new off-ramp. Another mile farther up the desert, Duke's environmentally-inconsiderate ride sputters—I'm out of gas, and back on foot. There's a conveniently placed railgun in the dust, carelessly left just outside the entrance to a mine where the alien piglets have made camp. Alerted, they run directly at me, each blasting with a pair of pistols. And I eviscerate them with the railgun one at a time, leaving streaks of neon-tinged smoke hanging in the air. The death animation is worthy of the original *Duke 3D*'s expressive sprites: every shot shears off at least one limb, meaty arms and calves detach like noodles that've soaked in soup for too long. I torment a few of the lifeless hogs, dissecting what's left with my shotgun to create appendage-less torsos. Further up, I blast an armored, Ripper chaingun-wielding version of the hogs. It grasps in panic at its neck, then its head balloons and pops. Everything that other games' railguns taught you is wrong: they occasionally inflate your enemies' heads.

I reach a mine entrance that's been boarded up with planks. I'm tapping through the possible melee keys to bash through it—I haven't needed to go hand-to-hand with an enemy yet. Duke chimes in: "A crowbar would come in handy right about now." Gordon Freeman envy, eh Duke? Inside the mine, I blast a few floating Octobrains for the first time. I'm happy to see another familiar, many-tentacled face, but the way I progress through the mine is still completely familiar: shooting up enemies and solving simple mine cart-pushing puzzles to cross chasms.

If the two-level slice that 2K Games showed us represents the sum of what we'll play, *Duke Nukem Forever* might not be 2011's most innovative shooter, but it'll be 2011's best *popcorn* shooter. We've endured a decade where—with the exception of *Fallout 3*'s ironic send-up of '50s idealism—first-person games have drifted into a place where humor is hard to come by.

Maybe that's why fans lined up for hours to catch just a few minutes of Duke in action at PAX. Deployed to one grim, post-apocalyptic war zone after another, we're overdue to just have some fun, kick some ass, and chew some bubble gum. I didn't see any gum, but *Duke Nukem Forever*'s got plenty of the other stuff. ■

Eternally '90s, Duke's visage is practically untouched in *Forever*. Will the original style of humor-heavy, simple shooting feel as ageless?

King of Duke

Randy Pitchford was a 3D Realms employee during the original *Duke Nukem 3D* era. He's now carrying *Duke Nukem Forever* to completion as CEO and President of Gearbox Studios.

Randy Pitchford

PC Gamer: There's a drought of humor-driven games. Why do you think that is?

Randy Pitchford: It's weird, isn't it? And we've heard from a lot of people, like—"is *Duke* relevant?" And to me *Forever* is kind of fresh in that everything else is trying to take itself so seriously. It kind of stands out on its own and it really has an impact because of that. We clearly had fun with *Borderlands*. We let ourselves have fun with that, and that was almost cathartic for us.

Exploration has always been a big component of *Duke*—what can players expect to run into?

The whole game is littered with fun things. There's a fully-functional pinball game. I remember losing my first ball, and it says: "I've got balls of fail." [laughs] I don't want to ruin it because the discovery of these kinds of thing is part of the joy as well. But there's another part where you're backstage, waiting to be a guest on a late-night talk show. Everyone is freaking out because you're Duke Nukem and they want you to sign their autograph book. And you wander into the kitchen—and there's all these appliances you can interact with. You open the microwave and you're like "there's some food in that cabinet—let's grab some popcorn and put it in the microwave." Sure enough, the freaking popcorn pops. You take that out and you eat it. And then you go under the sink and open the cabinet and there's a rat.

"I wonder what happens if I put the rat in the microwave?"

And a light bulb goes off in your head: "I wonder what happens if I put the rat in the microwave?" You can imagine what happens next.

Do you think FPS players' expectations have changed in a way that these gags won't stick?

Duke Forever is not a collection of homages. It benefits from its legacy in *Duke 3D*, and It finds itself in a world where we have all these amazing technological capabilities, but the rest of the world hasn't leveraged some of those original innovations—interactivity and "testing the world" in a way that provides surprising rewards and feedback. So *Duke* still feels amazingly fresh. The pacing works. It's kind of like how *Citizen Kane* is still a great movie.

Did you just compare *Duke* to *Citizen Kane*?

No, that would be terrible. It'd be like comparing *Duke* to *Star Wars* or something. We make interactive entertainment. Totally different playing field.

What do you going to do when it actually releases?

I'm going to Disneyland! [laughs] I don't know. It's a good question. It's hard to fathom. We're certainly going to have a big-ass party.

TRIPLE THREAT

With **SPACE MARINE**, **RETRIBUTION** and **DARK MILLENIUM ONLINE**, war is everywhere

Times have never been better for wars and hammers. Our favorite, good guy-less universe is being game-ified more than ever, and we're thrilled about it. *Warhammer 40K* fiction's absence of silky-haired protagonists to wrap clichés around should produce novel takes on well-worn genres—especially the MMO.

After all, *Warhammer* still represents one of the best treatments of licenses that didn't originate in videogames. The two developers creating these three games also have a lot of pride on the line: Relic wants to maintain its reputation as the world's innovating-est strategy studio while producing its first modern, multiplayer shooter. And Vigil Games is dead set on proving that its action game know-how, not a romantic fascination with hotkeys, will let it produce an MMO that's the opposite of what we're expecting. "*World of Warhammercraft*" is the last thing Vigil wants to make.

There's at least 40,000 reasons to pay attention to this trio—not the least of which is the opportunity to finally play a campaign as *40K*'s sexy, magic space elves (see page 57).

Holy crap, they can use swords now? Tyranids were scary when they *couldn't* use swords.

Dawn of War II: Retribution

The next expansion ups the scale dramatically *by Tom Francis*

A gun that fires black holes. Pirate Orks in space. Ninja star machine guns. Magic flying elves. Chainsaw axes. These are all in *Retribution*, the second standalone follow-up to sci-fi strategy game *Dawn of War II*. Yes, this is a game for men.

Retribution is a radical change from *DoW2*. In that game (and the first expansion, *Chaos Rising*), you command a band of a dozen or so human Space Marines and fight through one enormously long campaign against aliens. In *Retribution*, you choose which race to play, and each has a unique campaign and can field a larger, more diverse army.

READ ME
PUBLISHER THQ
DEVELOPER Relic Entertainment
RELEASE March 2011
LINK www.dawnofwar2.com

In *DoW2* you had around six heroes to choose from, and you could only take four on each mission. *Retribution* changes that system: each race has at most four heroes, and your choice with each is whether to take them on a mission, or a replacement squad or vehicle instead. Resources are back, and reinforcements can be built when you've secured map points. The idea is to cater to strategy gamers who missed being able to produce and command a huge force in *DoW2*, without losing the ability to micromanage a small band of powerful heroes.

It caters to gamers who missed being able to produce and command a huge force in *DoW2*.

This man's army

When Lead Designer Dan Kading plays Eldar, for example, he doesn't swap his Warlock for its alternative, the Wraithlord dreadnought. The Warlock has an ability that burns a whole group of enemies, and as you level it up it gets preposterously powerful. He benches the Farseer healing hero, though, in favor of the Seer Council: a team of supremely powerful robed swordsmen. He likes them better because they have the ability to share any buffs and powers your commander has: in this case, a flying lunatic with a scythe, the Autarch. Finally, Kading takes the stealthy Pathfinder hero because he's upgraded its sniping ability with rapid-fire concussive shots that knock back everyone near the target.

As you can tell, your decision about who to take often comes down to what abilities you've unlocked for your heroes. The clever thing is that you're not just upgrading the heroes themselves: upgrades unlock not only an ability for the hero himself, but also a change or upgrade for his alternative squad. Even if you've never taken a squad into battle, it's been getting more powerful as it sits on the bench so that it's ready when you need it. You do get to specialize, though—at the end of a mission, you'll get a choice of rewards: wargear for your heroes, an upgrade for a squad or vehicle, or a whole new unit type to unlock for building in the field.

A swarm of your own

We already knew the low-intelligence, high-aggression Orks are an option, and so are the spell-casting Eldar. Of the other two playable races in the game, I now know one: the space-bug Tyranids. They're the

Everybody looks (and squashes) like ants from up here.

That's a nice destructible bridge you've got there. It'd be a shame if something were to destruct it...

An upgraded Eldar Farseer fears no giant space bug.

This mission climax took actual thought about unit composition and positioning.

swarming hive-mind race of Warhammer 40K, so the four-hero setup doesn't make as much sense for them. So if you play as the Tyranids, you have just one hero: the Swarmlord. You still level up and find hero loot, but the rest of the progression is purely about expanding your army. Tyranids can build up the biggest army in the game, a swarm of up to about 140 units.

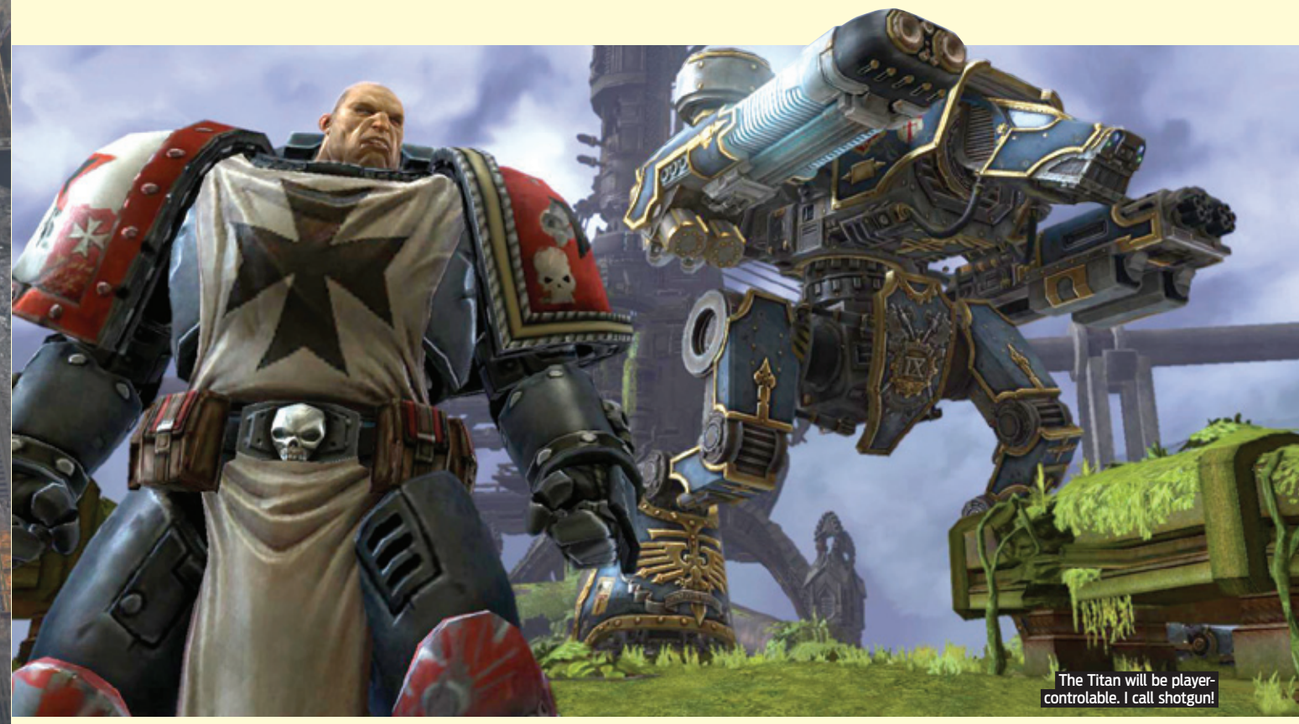
Once they've gathered resources, they can produce sneaky Lictors, tough Hive Guards and even gigantic Carnifexes. When Kading played, his swarm army was all but wiped out by an Ork force of heavy vehicles, so he rebuilt it with the opposite philosophy: three Carnifexes, each the price of 30 lesser units, and his Swarmlord. They tore the Orks limb-from-limb, proving unstoppable until they hit the level boss: an Ork Battlewagon. When this thing rams, whatever it touches is dead. I'll be honest: this boss fight wasn't particularly exciting—Kading won by baiting the tank into ramming explosive barrels. But the other mission I saw had a more interesting conclusion.

In this one, the Eldar were tracking an Ork convoy through a twisting canyon, fighting their way across the cliff tops to catch up. Once they got ahead, now with a significant army, thanks to the resource points and command posts they'd captured along the way, they prepared for an ambush.

Thoughtful destruction

Kading started by destroying stuff. His Pathfinder used explosives to take down bridges, letting him concentrate on the two remaining approaches. He had three Heavy Weapons Platforms, and had unlocked two upgrades for them over the course of the campaign. Using those upgrades, he configured each of his Weapon Platforms differently: a standard heavy Shuriken Cannon to suppress the Ork squads, slowing them down; a powerful Brightlance to punch through the armor of the trucks; and a D-Cannon, the gun that fires black holes, to destroy everything up to and including light. This mission climax took actual thought about unit composition and positioning, and necessitated a change of tactics when Ork squads almost overwhelmed the Eldar.

I'm glad that diversity is back, and I love the level of strategic freedom *Retribution* is mixing it with. *Dawn of War II*'s tiny scale was always a surprising experimental move for Relic—it wasn't a failure, but I think *Retribution* might be closer to the perfect balance between roleplaying and strategy.



The Titan will be player-controlable. I call shotgun!

Warhammer 40,000: Dark Millennium Online

The *40K* MMO's promise: war, war and more war. *Ace* **by Rich McCormick**

Remember that bit in the *Warhammer 40,000* rulebook where that Space Marine went into a Space Marine village and was cornered by a commoner with a yellow exclamation mark above his head? The one who told him to go out to his neighborhood cave and kill 10 snotlings that were terrorizing his space-crops? No, you don't, and neither does Mike Maza, creative director on the *Warhammer 40K* MMO, *Dark Millennium Online*.

"We just couldn't wrap our heads around a Space Marine killing 10 wolves for their pelts. It's just not *40K*. We don't want to give those kinds of quests to the players—we think it takes you out of the fiction. The objectives of our quests are far more epic than that."

READ ME
PUBLISHER THQ
DEVELOPER Vigil Games
RELEASE 2012
LINK www.darkmillenniumonline.com

Warhammer 40K's grim future of inter-species war is perhaps the only universe you could get away with a "kill X number of things" quest—except the number would be well into the thousands. But traditional online RPG models—all stilted combat and ritualistic toolbar presses—are antithetical to a universe based on the sole unifying principle of smashing the faces off everything that ever existed.

"We just couldn't wrap our heads around a Space Marine killing 10 wolves for their pelts."

Dave Adams, founding father of developer Vigil, weighs in: "At first we said, 'let's make a standard MMO. Guy goes in, dude's standing there, patrol walks by. I tap, select him, and hit the 1 key.' It was lousy."

It didn't fit with the game played on tabletops across the world, it didn't fit the team's imagined experience, and most importantly, it didn't fit with *40K*'s endless, rapid-fire carnage.

Adams explains his vision of the universe, earned from 25 years of familiarity with Games Workshop products: "We're designing a cinematic, action-oriented MMO, balanced in terms of player-on-player and player-versus-environment battles. There's a lot of ranged combat, but also a healthy dose of melee. You're not gonna have a bunch of static spawns, you're not gonna have a bunch of random patrols." Vigil is playing in a universe with one of the most passionate, lore-crazy fanbases (*Lord of the Rings Online*'s may edge them out) in gaming today. Were they to produce a retextured *WoW*, they'd be chainsworded to death by armies of angry fans—and rightly so.

Key problem

Fortunately, Vigil is aware of this. Adams has serious complaints about the state of MMOs. Whole genre, look away now: "You just pretty much hammer on the number keys. They're the same mechanic over and over again." Vigil previously worked on console-oriented action beat-'em-up *Darksiders*. That game is heavy on the reactive combat, full of man-stabbing

and bloody moments calculated to make people shout "yeah!" and want to play air guitar. Adams argues the team learned more from that experience than they have from their MMO peers. "There's a lot more finesse in what you do in a console game. The moment-to-moment, the weight of the animations, the response, the effects. It's really all about the pace."

Adams began to describe what he meant by this, but not before sticking a final power-armored boot into MMO contemporaries. "If you see an MMO 20 feet away you know it's an MMO. There's a million icons on the screen, the interface is the same. They're so predictable. Our goal is when some guy's walking past *DMO* they won't instantly know it's an MMO. That depends on a minimal interface: it's not a full FPS, but it looks more 'actiony.'"

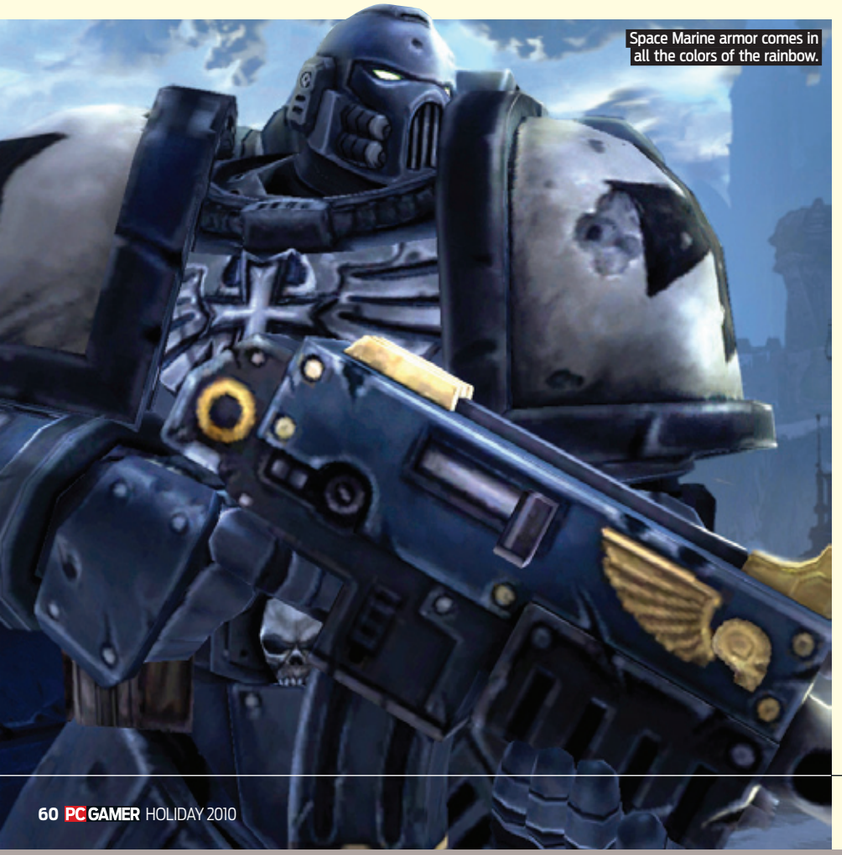
Actiony is not a word. Define "actiony," Dave! Maza stepped in to help: "We've done away with the action bar icon from the screen—we've kept it down to essential elements for ranged combat." That's not to suggest that it's all shooting—half of *Warhammer 40K* is focused on getting within spitting distance of your enemy and then jabbing the sharpest stick your race knows how to make into their eye. But Maza says that's simpler to handle than gunplay. "Melee combat is relatively easy—we have tons of examples of how it's been done in the past." It's similarly easy to see how it'll be approached in *DMO*—a middle ground between the kinetic feedback of single-player fighting and the arcane dance of MMO combat.

In other words, your mouse-handling skills will play more of a role than they would in a standard MMO, but Vigil agrees that it's not going to be a twitch-centric shooter. Adams clarifies: "It's still an RPG. There's still stats. Your ability as a character is related to your level and the kind of loot you have." Loot! See, other MMOs: *DMO* might flip its middle finger at you when you turn around, but it's still just one of the guys.

> **"Space Marines don't have towns."**
> ***—John Mueller, Art Director at Vigil Games***

The intrinsic need for loot and gear means no jettisoning of the usual systems of shopping and crafting—though how those systems are going to be portrayed hasn't been explained yet. I asked Art Director John Mueller what Space Marine towns would look like, and his response was simple: "Space Marines don't have towns. It's not like our cities are specifically a 'Space Marine town,' it's more just like a settlement in the Imperium, instead of a branded area." Artistically, how do they ensure that a generic settlement stays interesting and true to the fiction? "Everything is really old! That's what Games Workshop always says, whenever they put something in *40K*: just make it look really old."

As *40K*'s overlords, GW is understandably protective of its invention: it wouldn't do for a tech priest of the Adeptus Mechanicus, servants of the Emperor and born from the ancient forge world of Mars to be wearing a funny hat. Space Marines wear power armor; necessity states that you could end up looking like your friend if you play the same class. Mueller explains how to get around this problem and still foster a sense of identity. "Character customization is about progression, where you go and what you do in the world changes how you look. Space Marine armor is so heavily adorned, you can imagine how the progression might go: a Marine who's been on campaigns will make all kinds of adjustments to his armor reflecting his experience." I'm mentally accessorizing my Marine already: a nice Tyranid tooth necklace would bring out the red in my shoulder plates.



Space Marine armor comes in all the colors of the rainbow.

FACTIONAL WARFARE

Who's killing who in *Warhammer 40,000*'s fiction

IMPERIUM OF MAN A gigantic, spacefaring conglomerate of humans serving a god-emperor. The Imperium's warriors are genetically enhanced.

ELDAR Lithe space-fairies, the Eldar are lethal in attack but fragile in defense. They're a dying race: they had too many sexy parties and made a new Chaos God.

CHAOS A mass of twisted worshippers, demons and corrupted individuals turned all weird by a set of nasty gods and unstable warp energy. Love doing icky things.

TYRANIDS Bugs from beyond the galaxy, the Tyranids are remorseless killing machines. You might know them from *StarCraft*'s homage: the Zerg.

NECRONS Egyptian Borg, basically. Necrons are ancient, restless souls given machine bodies. Like most space zombies, they're very hard to kill.

DARK ELDAR The Eldar who refused to stop getting sexy went all insane, their perversions turning them into blood-crazed filth-pots. They love knives.

TAU The Tau are a young and presumptuous race. Not good for the other guys when they've got the best guns in the universe, and a fervent societal fundamentalism.

ORKS Or, Orcs in space. Orks are technically sentient fungi, and like all mushrooms, just love killing. Orks enjoy invading worlds and hitting things with axes.

Orks, passing the hard time before a hero comes along to kill them.

Chaos Dreadnoughts: you do not want to be their marshmallow.

Who's that light-armored shotgunner, eh? Could Imperium Agent be a playable class?

Developing a game in *Warhammer 40K*'s universe brings specific challenges. Traditional MMOs are built around downtime, longer periods of peace, shopping and chatting between raids. You stop to chat in *40K*'s fiction and you get sliced apart by shurikens, turned into a gibbering inside-out mass of muscle by Chaos gods, or swallowed whole by swarming Tyranids. As the sourcebooks regularly remind us, there is "ONLY WAR!" in the forty-first millennium. Adams has a philosophical way of handling this issue: "I imagine the *40K* universe as a giant machine whose output is war—but it's still a machine. There're still cogs and pistons, there's still all the internal machinations and workings of a machine that makes the war."

Adams paints a neat picture, but let's frame it in the hour-to-hour of playing the game. "There's a lot going on off the battlefield. Sure, war in the battlegrounds and PvP conflicts are a big part of the game. But another big part of the game is just exploring what's going on off the battlefield, following the fluff and stories."

War in *DMO* is stratified, taken further than just the *pew-pew* in direct conflict—it's about the thrill of the chase and lengthy quest lines. Even just for the Imperium, one of many not-yet confirmed races, there's different types of war: "the war on the battlefield, the psychological war the Imperium engages in to maintain this giant organization and prevent rebellion, the war against Chaos." Life in *Dark Millennium Online* is intended to be constant struggle, full of constant threat that—Vigil hopes—will provide enough of an incentive to live in a constant universe where war reigns.

Titanic

It's not just your character you'll be customizing: mechanized war machines are as central to *DMO* as they are to the *40K* fiction. The game's first trailer teases viewers, ending on footage of a five-story walker romping across a blasted landscape. That two-legged monster is a Titan, one of *40K*'s largest and most killy war-objects—and Adams confirms that a player was controlling it. "You'll use vehicles in PvE, you'll use them in the general over-world, and you'll use them in PvP." These vehicles can be operated with a crew, with separate players taking on the roles of gunner, driver and man who stands on top and yells "DRIVE FASTER!" That's my kind of Space Marine.

www.pcgamer.com

Never bring a battle-axe to a chainsword fight.

Squadmates occassionally show up to lend a hand.

Slash off a limb, then rinse and repeat until every Ork is dead.

That piece of scrap metal ain't gonna stop a plasma gun, greenskin.

There's never a shortage of enemies to shoot.

Killing Orks is what you do. Actually, it's all you do.

Warhammer 40K: Space Marine

The smartest strategy devs are making an action shooter. Why? ***by Tom Francis***

You're in an aircraft, clouds rushing by. As it banks, you see a massive fleet of other craft like yours dotting the sky. You're manning a door-mounted gun and, until an Ork with a jetpack floats past, you could easily be in a *Modern Warfare* game.

"This is a fresh take on *Warhammer 40K*," says Game Director Raph van Lierop. "We've been looking for a way to explore aspects of it that don't make sense in an RTS, [and] here we have an opportunity to bring it to a much broader audience. It's about understanding what aspects to express to players that aren't familiar with the IP. Once they get in there, they're like, 'Oh crap, I didn't realize this was so freaking cool and there was so much depth here and so much I can do!'"

READ ME
PUBLISHER THQ
DEVELOPER Relic Entertainment
LINK http://bit.ly/dC6Pqy

The plasma gun tears Orks' limbs off, or obliterates them in a light drizzle of blood.

Space Marine is a third-person shooter set on a forge world, an industrial planet that produces mountainous death machines. It's been overrun by a million Orks, and—a sentence I write way too often in this job—your dropship has crash-landed, leaving you alone behind enemy lines.

Action games aren't ordinarily Relic's thing. Console-only World War II shooter *The Outfit* was its experimental first step in that direction, and while it mixed strategic elements in effectively, its flat combat was criticized. Relic doesn't seem the obvious choice to turn the *Warhammer 40K* universe into a twitch carnage game.

The devs are not oblivious to that. In fact, their first move was to poach around 50 new hires from rivals and successful action studios, including people who've worked on *Counter-Strike* and *Half-Life*. Raph says: "We knew that we wouldn't be able to be competitive without bringing in new talent...We have almost 100 people on the team; I'd say probably half are new since the beginning of the project."

If you read any other previews of *Space Marine*, you'll probably find a *Gears of War* comparison in the first or second paragraph. I ask Raph if they're sick of it yet, and he says just the opposite: *Gears of War* is the gold standard of the genre. "When you're comparing favorably to the best games in the world," he explains, "you're probably doing something right."

Too simple?

So it's over-the-shoulder shooting, hordes of enemies and occasional squadmates to exchange manly exposition with. If anything, the *Gears of War* comparisons might be overcomplicating it a bit; that game is about using cover strategically, while *Space Marine* doesn't concern itself with such trivialities. There's cover, but a Space Marine has no "hide" button. Rather than when to shoot, it's who to shoot first.

The main reason to care about *Space Marine*, really, is that it's *40K*. It's an amazing universe, and one we rarely get to see close up. The first time you see an Ork Nob—armored close-combat warriors—bear down on you from this perspective is the first time you realize just how big, spiky and terrifying they actually are, despite the silly name.

The best part of seeing *Warhammer* fleshed out this way is the plasma gun. In *Space Marine*, you start with a bolter and chainsword, which you can purchase upgrades for once you've killed enough stuff. But you can also find entirely new weapons, and the plasma gun is the star so far. It has a muscular punch to every shot, and when it doesn't rip an Ork's arm, head or legs off, it obliterates them in a light drizzle of blood. If the game is good, it'll be because of weapons like this.

Guns are only part of the focus of combat: with this many Orks in combat spaces this tight, your chainsword sees a lot of use. A basic attack is enough to splat the average Ork, but you can also use "sync kills" to finish off tougher enemies, hurling them to the floor and stamping on their face, or lifting them up and shooting them. There's a bull-rush move if you're particularly eager to get to melee range, and the popular but seismologically dubious stomp move to stun enemies.

I saw three sections of *Space Marine*, each of which involved shooting and slashing Ork after Ork after Ork. In case it's not clear, you kill Orks in this game. If you do anything else, ever, Relic isn't talking about it yet. They won't even say if the variety stretches as far as killing non-Orks—when I ask specifically if there are other types of enemies, Lierop will only say, "There's a lot more going on on this planet than just Orks invading."

Is that enough? If the killing's good enough, of course it is. Does it seem good enough yet? Occasionally. *Space Marine* feels like half an idea for a game: I kept waiting for Relic to tell me the twist, the innovation, the experiment. Some games don't have one, and that's fine. *Gears of War* is fine. *Gears of Warhammer* would be fine too: I'd play it. But from the creators of *Homeworld* and *Dawn of War*, I can't help wondering if they have something else up their sleeve. And if not, why they're the ones making this. ■

Before you start, a guy played by Matthew Perry explains that he's going to shoot you in the head.

Need to know

What is it?
An open-world first-person RPG set in post-nuclear Las Vegas

Influenced by
Fallout, Oblivion

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800 GT/ Radeon HD 4850

Alternatively
Fallout 3 (91%)

Copy protection
Steam

ALL IN

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS doubles down on post-nuclear storytelling and quests ***by Dan Stapleton***

Gunshots ring out, shattering the quiet Nevada night. I panic for a moment, drawing my trusty shotgun and whirling around to scan the nearby burnt-out houses for raiders. Instead, a lone man approaches, his gun holstered. He tells me his tale: while trekking across the post-nuclear wastes he'd happened upon a fellow traveler. She'd seemed normal at first, even flirty, and he couldn't understand why she'd suddenly flipped out and tried to steal his lucky necklace—a string of Sunset Sarsaparilla Star bottle caps—forcing him to shoot her in the struggle.

But I do. I'm also collecting the rare caps, rumored to hold the key to a treasure. The traveler turns down my offer to buy the necklace; rebuffed, I finger the trigger of my shotgun. It'd be *so easy*. Yet, after defending a town from escaped cons, helping another town find a good sheriff and rescuing hostages from raiders, blowing off an innocent man's head for a string of caps would feel out of character. So I wish him well on his journey—only to hear his screams as a remorseless Giant Radscorpion a hundred yards down the road did what my conscience wouldn't allow me to, freeing up the necklace. It must be my lucky day—I should head to the casino.

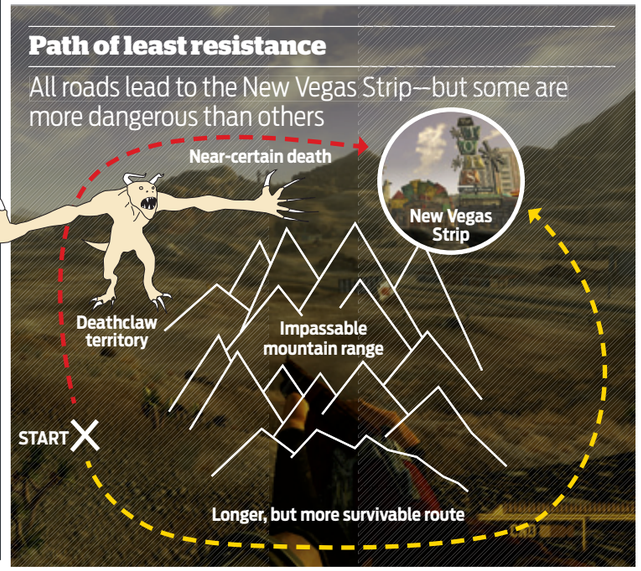
Viva New Vegas

Moral roleplaying quandaries and surprising twists like this one are commonplace in *Fallout: New Vegas*. It's a huge, totally new world built on the foundation of our 2008 Game of the Year, *Fallout 3*—and in many ways an improvement over it. Taking over development from Bethesda, Obsidian distinguishes itself with story-crafting expertise. What began as a simple quest for personal revenge ended up casting me as kingmaker in a four-way war for control of the region. The players: the freedom-loving but bureaucratic New California Republic from the west; the warlike, slave-owning Caesar's Legion from the east; New Vegas' home-grown Wizard of Oz, the enigmatic Mr. House; and an ambitious upstart with a plan of his own. It's a thought-provoking, coherent plot with a finale that's far more morally ambiguous, nuanced and malleable than the previous game's unsubtle "thumbs-up or thumbs-down to genocide" decision, and a huge amount of back story—some of it dark, some of it darkly hilarious—on every faction is available for players who are willing to listen to their tales.

Las Vegas wasn't hard-hit in the apocalyptic nuclear war of 2077, and isn't as uniformly scorched as the Capital Wasteland of *F3*. There's plenty of variation in outdoor scenery between sandy, cacti-dotted desert, rocky red canyons and the relatively fertile shores of the Colorado River. And the New Vegas Strip with its three halfway-restored casinos is a garishly bright and colorful contrast to the bleak desert.

Reloaded

Since *FNV* uses the same aging technology as its predecessor, it can't do much to address some of the biggest gameplay complaints against *F3*—stiff character animations, simplistic combat AI and the eventually repetitious slow-motion kill camera remain in full effect. The graphics, of course, look just like they did in 2008. That's not to say it doesn't make any major improvements. New features, including weapon mods,



Thanks to the new armor system, Deathclaws are way, way harder to kill. If you see two, run like hell.

I'm like a kid in an energy weapon store.

Even nuclear war can't take the glitz out of Las Vegas.

There's only one way to skin a gecko, but you can tan their hides to make them more valuable.

I probably didn't need to mod my laser rifle with a scope for this kill—but it didn't hurt.

faction disguises, vastly expanded crafting options, a new armor system and multiple ammunition types give you a ton more to think about, both in combat and out. The one change to the skills—grouping Big Guns and Small Guns into Guns—makes a lot of sense, and the conversation system is demystified, revealing exactly what skill level you need to talk your way out of a situation.

Companions are also more interesting. My sidekicks finally felt like actual personalities instead of operating as bodyguards that you can dress up, and each one grants a unique perk while they're in your party. Most of my time was spent with Raul, the sarcastic ghoul mechanic, and Rex the cybernetic dog. (There are at least five more.) Each is packed with character—Raul gradually opens up about his past, and Rex...well, he really hates hats. *FNV*'s companions are unkillable, getting temporarily KO'd rather than decapitated by a Deathclaw's backhand, removing the annoying need to reload your game to resurrect a fallen sidekick. Each gives a line of quests, too, though in Raul's case I found them tricky to unlock.

Tourist attraction

Not that I was lacking for things to do—I'm blown away by the sheer amount of new areas to explore, creatures to fight, quests to complete and weapons, armor and other loot to gather. If you stick to the main quest you can rush through in 10 to 15 hours, but you'd miss out on the bulk of the game—and the addictive feeling of discovery you get from just walking the Earth, doing good or kicking puppies. You can barely walk more than 30 seconds in any direction without seeing something on the horizon to investigate: a town, a raider camp, a robot factory or just a hole in the ground that might contain loot or mutated wasps.

Most of the quests are great, memorable experiences. There are a number of ways to expose the dark secret of the well-dressed-but-creepy White Glove Society, which runs one of the Strip's casinos, ranging from letting God sort 'em out post-mortem to an elaborate scheme to con the real culprit into publicly betraying himself—with a few in between. Helping a cult of ghouls achieve their holy goal can have an explosive payoff—good or bad. Others, though, reek of filler busywork, such as the one that had me running back and forth between towns basically delivering "Do U like me?" notes for an insecure teenager. There are so many, though, that you can afford to be discriminating about which you choose to take on. By the time I completed the main quest for the first time I'd put in more than 50 hours and reached level 26 (of 30), and, based on the size of the map and the fact that I never even encountered the character voiced by *Star Trek*'s Michael Dorn, I'd probably only explored a little over half of the side-quest content.

In any game of this size and complexity there are going to be some bugs, and although I didn't hit any game-breakers, there were enough to damage my immersion. Shooting an evil raider in the face awards me a karmic pat on the head, but looting gear from his now-ownerless tent still counts as stealing? A high-ranking Legion guard can see through the flimsy disguise I lifted from a dead soldier, but when I drop him his nearby minions don't react? These gaffes can be forgiven in hindsight, but at the time they're galling. *FNV* is, however, reliably constructed: Even though one area became crashy when I overloaded a crate with my excess belongings, virtually no progress was lost thanks to the frequent autosave.

Perked up

I found the menu of new perks full of stand-outs such as Meltdown, which causes enemies killed by laser or plasma weapons to explode with a damaging shockwave, and Long Haul, which allows you to fast-travel to a store even while encumbered—both worth looking forward to. But as I got to the higher levels they thinned out like oxygen at high altitude—few new ones unlock above level 20, and I couldn't see any level 30 perks at all to incentivize me to max out my character.

But I don't *need* any more motivation. I'm hooked on the rewards of exploring—blazing new trails across the Nevada desert. With more than 50 hours under my belt already, I'm still itching to get back in for another 50 to see what I missed. The excellent story, refinements to gameplay and extreme replayability all add up to something great—*Fallout: New Vegas* has out-*Fallout*ed *Fallout 3*. ■

Glutton for punishment

The optional Hardcore mode takes off the kid gloves

Wussy mode: Ammo has no weight
Hardcore: No more bottomless bullet bucket for you!

Wussy mode: The only things that hurt are bullets, knives and radiation
Hardcore: You've gotta eat, drink and sleep to survive

Wussy mode: Any injury can be insta-healed with stimpacks
Hardcore: Stims heal you slowly; broken limbs need a doctor

Wussy mode: Companions get back up after getting "killed" in a fight
Hardcore: The dead stay dead

I'm hooked on the rewards of blazing new trails across the Nevada desert.

VERDICT

Outstanding writing and a gigantic world packed with interesting things make *Fallout: New Vegas* a must-play RPG.

PC GAMER 92

◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks ◆ **Developer** Obsidian Entertainment
◆ **Multiplayer** No ◆ **Link** http://fallout.bethsoft.com ◆ **ESRB** M

DAMPENED

Ambitious and attractive, Codie's **F1 2010** racer spits out a few too many misfires to win the day ***by Andy Mahood***

Need to know

What is it?
The officially licensed F1 car racing simulator
Influenced by
GRID, F1 Challenge 99-02
Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800 GT/ Radeon HD 4850
Alternatively
rFactor (90%)
Copy protection
Steam

With my Williams-Cosworth screaming at 18,000 rpm, I maneuver sharply out from the slipstream of Robert Kubica's bright yellow Renault. I have no choice. It's raining buckets here at Spa, and I can't see a *damned thing* through his spray as we approach the legendary Eau Rouge uphill sweeper at over 175 mph. My visor clears somewhat in the clean air, and the first thing I see is a lot of deep, shimmering puddles ahead. This could get messy.

Welcome to *F1 2010*, an ambitious and beautiful—albeit somewhat buggy and inauthentic—multi-platform Grand Prix racer that marks the first licensed Formula One game to hit the PC in seven years.

Live the F1 life

Codemasters has done an exceptional job capturing the pomp, ceremony and ego of Grand Prix racing. One of *F1 2010's* most impressive features is its addictive "Live the Life" career mode where you assume the role of a rookie driver on a third-tier team seeking glory. Out-qualify your teammate and finish in the top eight and you might even entertain new contract offers from competitive operations like McLaren and Ferrari.

All 19 circuits from the 2010 F1 season (including the as-yet unraced South Korean Yeongam track) as well as all 24 drivers and all 12 teams from the current campaign appear, and everything—from the detailed car cockpit to the pit garage to the post-race pressroom—is rendered in eye-popping detail, even on a mid-range system. AI drivers usually present an entertaining challenge—punctuated by aggressive feints and blocks—and the Games for Windows Live-powered 12-player online game produces some terrific warm-blooded multiplayer action.

One of the biggest highlights is the remarkable rain effects. When the skies open up, your ribbon of asphalt might turn slightly damp—or become awash in hazardous puddles. The dynamically changing weather can also force you to struggle with a rain tire-shod car on a rapidly drying track (complete with expanding dry line), and vision-reducing refractive water droplets on your visor dramatically enhance the immersion.

Wet blanket

Unfortunately, there are a number of serious bugs and deficiencies that can slam on the brakes. The most egregious of these is a pit stop hesitation bug that loses you precious track position every time you pit for tires. That's not all: there's a bug that can corrupt your saved game, harsh timing penalties for slight "offs" or AI car-initiated contact, blatant AI driver cheats (including skipped mandatory pit stops and no performance drop-off following a collision), a broken tire model that gives you multiple, senseless punctures and a surprisingly clumsy and unattractive replay screen.

Codemasters' promise of an integrated simulation model led me to expect a formidable driving experience, but even after disabling driving aids like ABS and traction control I remain unconvinced. I never once felt like I was fully in control of a 730-horsepower F1 thoroughbred, but rather a constrained and carefully tweaked console racer. Because of this mollycoddling, tire lockups and oversteer/understeer dynamics are largely nonexistent and the sudden snap spins that do occur seem canned and unnatural.

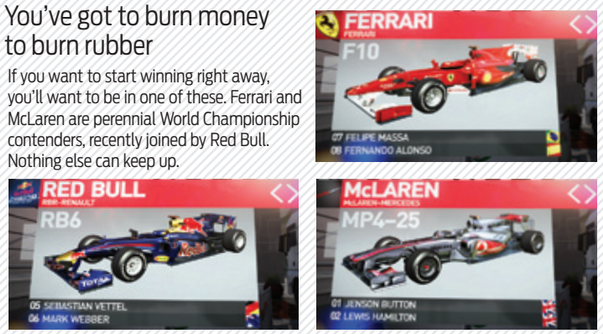
So it's not the sim I'd hoped for, but considered as an arcade racing successor to *GRID* and *DiRT*, *F1 2010* is an entertaining yet flawed racer that's still a patch or two away from greatness. ■

I never once felt like I was fully in control of a 730-hp F1 thoroughbred.

The F1 winners club

You've got to burn money to burn rubber

If you want to start winning right away, you'll want to be in one of these. Ferrari and McLaren are perennial World Championship contenders, recently joined by Red Bull. Nothing else can keep up.

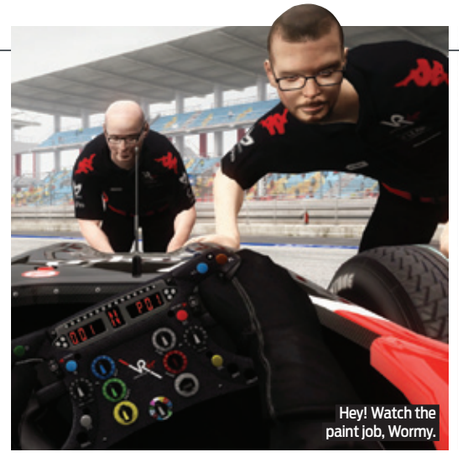


VERDICT

F1 2010 needs another pit stop to pull to the lead of the PC racing grid, but it still manages to be an entertaining ride.

PC GAMER **76**

◆ **Price** $40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Codemasters ◆ **Developer** Codemasters ◆ **Multiplayer** 12 players ◆ **Link** www.formula1-game.com ◆ **ESRB** E


Hey! Watch the paint job, Wormy.

Any contact with the AI cars—even when it's *their* fault—can result in draconian time penalties.

Ultra-soft rain tires shouldn't last more than a lap or two on a bone-dry track—but they do.

For such a pretty game, the replay screen is surprisingly weak.

So *this* is why most cars have windshields.

SAME OLD STORY

We've been here before, but **ARCANIA: GOTHIC 4** makes its tale of revenge via trivial busywork a worthy adventure ***by Tom Senior***

Need to know

What is it?
An accessible fantasy RPG set in a medieval world of kings, castles and quest-giving peasants

Influenced by
Gothic 3

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800 GT/ Radeon HD 4850

Alternatively
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (95%)

Copy protection
CD Key

The new *Arcania* prefix is an attempt to signify a fresh start to the *Gothic* series from a fresh developer, but there's nothing especially new about *Gothic 4*.

In traditional *Gothic* roleplaying style, you're a nameless hero marked by destiny. He's just proposed to his true love and the happy couple are expecting a child when, suddenly but inevitably, disaster strikes. His idyllic village is razed and his family killed by the troops of the evil king.

It's time for some good old-fashioned revenge. Our hero sets out on a mission to find a mystical forge hidden in the mountains and obtain the power to take down the mad monarch. So begins an adventure that has you traveling to every corner of the island, appeasing helpless peasants, looting meandering dungeons and slaughtering boatloads of gibbering Goblins.

Arcania's huge, wide-open areas offer a gorgeous, if utterly familiar rendition of a traditional medieval fantasy world. Rolling farmlands hide dungeons packed with typical Orcs and spiders. Wooden townships and dark stone castles are populated by dozens of mead-guzzling peasants, *every single one of whom* wants something from you. Crop-gobbling beetles need squashing, Goblins need clobbering, mead needs fetching. *Arcania*'s inhabitants are some of the neediest I've ever encountered, and also some of the most irritating. The voice work is so relentlessly awful that I found myself rushing into townships, accepting quests and fleeing the peasants' screeching diatribes as quickly as humanly possible.

Mead is murder

Arcania is at its best when you're in the wilderness, slaying foes and exploring the beautiful world. The fast and accessible combat system will be familiar to *Gothic 3* players—left-clicking unleashes melee strikes or magic bolts, and right-clicking blocks or dodges. Enemies telegraph their most powerful strikes with an obvious glow, and survival depends heavily on getting out of the way and counter-attacking. There are a few disciplines to master, including melee combat, archery and magic, but I quickly fell into the rhythm of the old zap-and-stab, a tiresome tactic that got me through every single fight. The slim offering of skills meant there was never a sense that I was building my own character, simply opting into one of several pre-designed warriors.

Its systems may be shallow, but I still became hooked on *Arcania*'s world. The game transitions effortlessly from huge, open areas to claustrophobic dungeons, from mountain ranges to tightly-packed towns. I fell easily into the rhythm of exploring, fighting off a mob, rounding the next corner and exploring some more. Its greatest strength is its comforting sense of rhythm in the beautiful, gradually unraveling world. The expert pacing had me rocketing through the 15 or so hours it took to complete the main quest.

Gothic vets may be left cold by this accessible and uncomplicated outing, but for those looking for a good old-fashioned fantasy romp, *Arcania* has its charms. It's predictable, shallow and the voice work is horrendous, but if you go in expecting no surprises, then there's some addictive adventuring to be had. ■

Its systems may be shallow, but I still became hooked on *Arcania*'s world.

Recipes for victory

The three prime strategies for beating *Arcania*

Zap 'n' stab!
Immobilize your foes with a quick lightning bolt to the face, then unleash combos on their convulsing forms until victorious.

Ice 'n' snipe!
Use Ice bolts to slow down your foes, and then take advantage of their sluggishness by shooting them in the head for massive damage.

Immolate 'n' procrastinate!
Fireballs ignite would-be aggressors and deal damage over time. Light 'em up and play the waiting game. Stay out of harm's way and they'll eventually keel over.

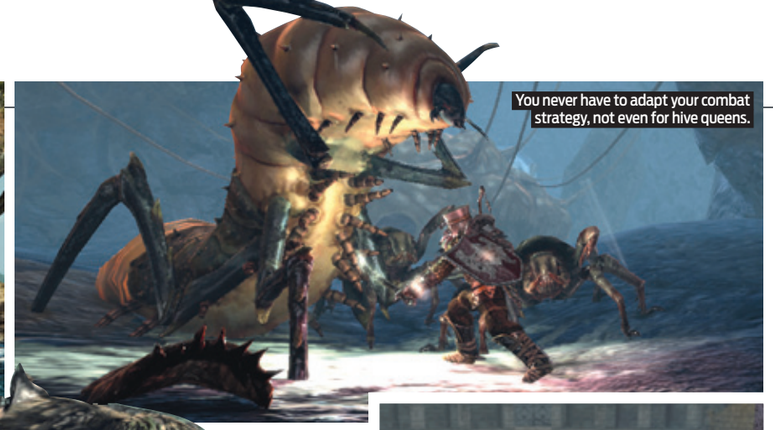
◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** DreamCatcher Games ◆ **Developer** Spellbound Entertainment ◆ **Multiplayer** No ◆ **Link** http://bit.ly/6dYMyL ◆ **ESRB** M

VERDICT

A fun adventure in a world that begs to be explored, but horrible voice acting and a lack of depth keep *Arcania* from greatness.

PC GAMER **76**

The giant mystical tree is the prettiest place in the game.


You never have to adapt your combat strategy, not even for hive queens.

And now to give this Troll a Brazillian with my broadsword.

"You must go to the Degobah system."

At several points you're given a choice between heavy armor or mage garb.

"If you ask me to fetch one more thing, I'll kick your ass."

The Scout's new stuff makes him even *more* annoying to fight.

TF2's collection metagame now feels fully-populated.

COMBATALISM

THE POLYCOUNT PACK is the biggest, most not-free **TEAM FORTRESS 2** update yet ***by Evan Lahti***

Need to know

What is it?
A $50 bundle of 12 weapons and five jealousy-inducing hats

Influenced by
The *TF2* community, love of money

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800 GT/ Radeon HD 4850

Alternatively
Battlefield: Bad Company 2 (81%)

Copy protection
Steam

Items! Geeeeet yer items! A jug of fake, life-restoring milk that costs more than actual milk! A rifle that shoots pee-filled darts! A live mackerel so tightly wrapped in newspaper, it fells Russian man-bears in three swats!

Team Fortress 2 makes its first foray into paid downloadable content in its three-year history with the *Polycount Update*: a cache of 17 items—12 weapons and five hats—that sell individually for between $2.49 and $17.49 each, or $50 if you buy them all at once.

These community-designed items include at least three new equipables each for *TF2*'s Soldier, Spy, Pyro and Scout classes, and it's important to note that all of the class items included in the bundle can be obtained for free using *TF2*'s item-crafting system, or can be found randomly just by playing the game.

Three of the weapons set new standards for their class. The Black Box ($2.49) is a compromise between the Soldier's existing options for rocket launching, retaining the generous splash damage blast radius of the basic launcher while dealing more damage and healing 15 HP with every strike—all at the expense of just one less missile per clip. The Scout's Shortstop ($2.49), a four-barreled pistol that reloads quickly, slows your target on hit and is more accurate at medium range. The Spy's fancy "Your Eternal Reward" knife ($4.99) disguises you as your victim near-instantaneously, letting you skewer isolated targets without fear of discovery.

The Sniper's "Sydney Sleeper" rifle ($2.49) earns my highest recommendation. It can't score critical hits with headshots, but successful shots splash your enemy in urine, increasing the damage dealt to that target. It's juvenile, effective and it removes the pressure to make perfect skullshots when you're looking down the scope. Get it.

Each of these weapons can renew your interest in a class that's become stale to you. But it's disconcerting that you *need* the $17.49, ludicrously overpriced headgear to unlock the new item set bonuses (an extra boost from wearing all the items in the set), such as taking 20% less damage from sentry guns. It's these passive buffs that present a worrying risk to *TF2*'s game balance, considering that it potentially takes weeks of playing and crafting to acquire all the items in a set without buying them.

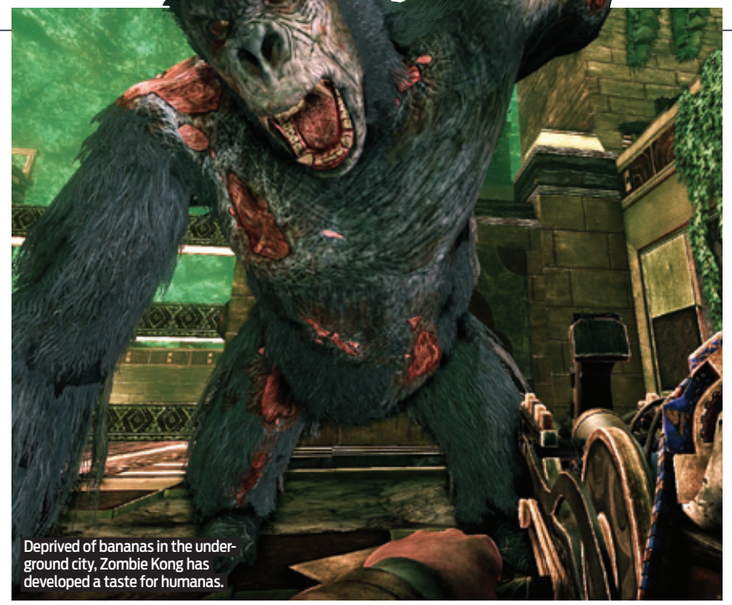
I love that Valve's deployed an entire cache of new equipment to *TF2*, but there's absolutely no reason to splurge on the entire $50 pack. Shop smart: grab a gun or two for your favorite class, and earn the rest in battle or bartering. ■

◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Valve Software ◆ **Developer** Valve Software
◆ **Multiplayer** 32 players ◆ **Link** www.teamfortress.com ◆ **ESRB** M

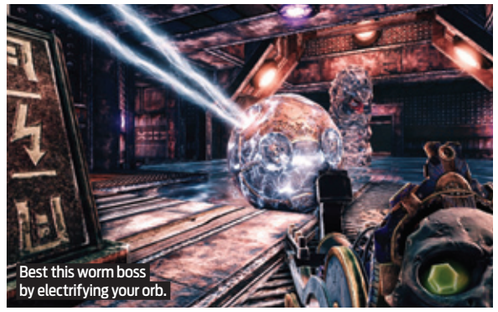
VERDICT

One of *TF2*'s most significant updates, but don't pay for the buffet when you can shop the new armory à la carte.

PC GAMER **80**


Deprived of bananas in the underground city, Zombie Kong has developed a taste for humanas.

Seven-ten split? No problem.


Best this worm boss by electrifying your orb.

BALLER

An underground puzzle fiesta of doom? This sounds like a job for THE BALL *by Evan Lahti*

Need to know

What is it?
Oversized bowling in caves, with puzzles and a novel adventure-horror feel

Influenced by
Indiana Jones, Portal

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800 GT/ Radeon HD 4850

Alternatively
Portal

Copy protection
Steam

Giant stone balls are the natural enemy of hero-archaeologists. They flatten our fedoras, chase us down long corridors and guard the tombs we're trying to loot.

The Ball busts that paradigm, handing you a bone-crushing boulder of your own as your sole tool for solving first-person puzzles. You've fallen into a Mexican pit, discovering miles of forgotten ruins that could fill a decade's worth of *National Geographic*s. The first thing you find is an enchanted, gun-shaped artifact (complete with an embedded, jewel-eyed skull) that acts as a controller for a large, ancient steel ball.

Your device has two functions: magnetically drawing the ball toward you, and punching it away from you with a piston. This is the basis for six hours' worth of underground puzzles—machinery-driven challenges that task you to move gears, traverse lava, loosen stone blocks and push buttons to raise water levels to advance to the next room. If *Portal* was about mid-air agility and outside-the-box, cerebral problem-solving, *The Ball* is about slow momentum and pushing your way into the next room with God's bowling ball. Think of it as a magical Mayan bowling alley.

This game has more combat than *Portal*, even if that combat is simple and over quickly: between puzzle rooms you're chased by entombed horrors, such as mummies and a zombified King Kong. These aren't clever enemies: they run directly at you, and swat you with their decrepit claws until you either die or crush them with your weighted companion sphere. Being mostly defenseless kept me off-balance in places—I caught myself in a panicky fit of bunnyhopping, yelling "Ohgodohgod!" when I was separated from my ball and hounded by angry mummies. But the fighting doesn't demand any creative thinking—the handful of bosses even use the tired, matador-style "lure, dodge, attack" mechanic we've seen in hundreds of games. Difficulty is at its greatest in the four-level survival mode, which dumps waves of enemies into a circuit of hazards and makes you leap through hordes of giant bugs and mummies to reach controls that activate deadly traps.

It's *The Ball*'s puzzles that make it unique and worthwhile. None of them are particularly brain-breaking (and there's a hint button within reach at all times), mostly amounting to guiding your globe over obstacles to reach buttons, but they're gently paced in a way that produces something calming and enjoyable (in between mummy attacks). The easy, intuitive fun of kicking your dynamically-lit, polished, multi-ton marble through the environment and watching the ballet of Newtonian physics play out is an adventure on its own. ■

◆ **Price** $20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Tripwire Interactive ◆ **Developer** Teotl Studios ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.theballthegame.com ◆ **ESRB** M

VERDICT

A joyous and addictive action puzzler. It's packed full of brilliant spells, animations and an infectious sense of fun.

PC GAMER **81**

GOOSE EGG

Great balls of fire explode as TOP GUN crashes and burns *by Michael Quach*

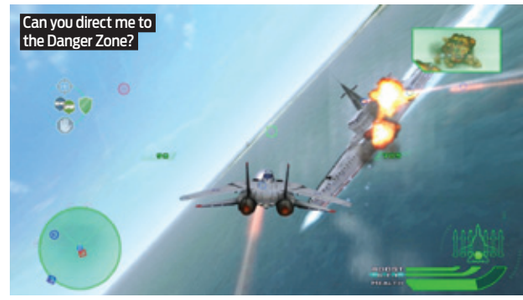
Planes are exploding all around me as my radar operator warns about missiles closing in. No sweat. I pull off a 180-degree spin to face the incoming missiles and launch my flares just in time to watch the missiles whizz past my cockpit, exploding safely behind me. I return the favor, easily obliterating each enemy plane out of the sky. Too easily. *Top Gun* may have loose ties to the classic 1986 action film/ recruitment poster, but the game's flight combat never takes off.

Hold up, hotshot: you won't even be cleared for takeoff without an Xbox 360 controller. Do you have a joystick, different gamepad, or just a mouse and keyboard? You won't get past the main menu. *That's* a sloppy console port.

The campaign, set in the Nevada desert and the Indian Ocean, gave me just two basic objectives: kill all the enemies and travel between checkpoints. Over the brief five hours it took to beat, *Top Gun* neither gave me a challenge nor gave me a reason to rethink my tactics; flying in a circle was enough to out-fly any enemy. Instead of giving the enemy different weapons or ballsy combat maneuvers like those shown during the cinematics, the game just tediously spawns more enemies with more health. Toward the end of the game, there are so many enemies in the air that the missile lock warning alarm never turns off.

Top Gun is a lazily made and easily forgettable experience. Deploy anti-bad game countermeasures now! ■

PC GAMER **38**


Can you direct me to the Danger Zone?

Eat missile spam, red dot!

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Paramount Digital Entertainment ◆ **Developer** Doublesix Games ◆ **Multiplayer** 12 ◆ **Link** bit.ly/aocFMI ◆ **ESRB** T

Kiss my shoe. KISS IT!

Kaká spent days running from the evil ball.

Red card! Mullet on the field!

BEAUTIFUL

It puts in an excellent stint, but it's hard to not be jealous of **FIFA 11**'s flashier console cousin ***by Rich McCormick***

Need to know

What is it?
The official soccer game—control a team of men and kick balls into goals

Influenced by
Soccer, *Pro Evolution Soccer*

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 260/ Radeon HD 4870

Alternatively
Pro Evolution Soccer 2011, 74%

Copy protection
SecuROM, EA account

These are the facts: our *FIFA 11* is not as good as the *FIFA 11* on consoles. It's more like *FIFA 10.5*. But *FIFA 11* on PC is still excellent—orders of magnitude better than last year's sloppy version—and beautiful, even on average PCs.

Its strength is its responsiveness. A button-jab (Xbox 360 gamepad strongly recommended) elicits an immediate reaction: a leg stuck out or a toe extended. Sports Game Frustration (SGF) invariably comes as a result of missed cues, when computer people don't do what flesh-and-blood humans would in the same situation. But *FIFA*'s behind-the-scenes magic generally pulls the correct response out of its grab bag of skills. Passes are zippy, and through-balls weighted with risk but lethal when deployed at a weakened defense.

SGF isn't entirely excised, however. Several times I found my charges pulling moves more suited to the other end of the field. I had Emile Heskey barrel toward a perfectly bouncing ball, smelling his first goal since the invention of fire, before leaping sadly and caressing it into a waiting goalkeeper's mitts with a pathetic header.

Crossing is toothless: ponderous box-bound balls take far too long to find a receiving head. Momentum is most important with wing-play—delivering a ball at the end of a storming 40-yard run will sometimes see it slam off the forehead of a striker who's been keeping pace—but even when I picked a Stoke or a Sunderland, teams based around aerial domination, I rarely connected with solid headers. Fine control, too, is far from reality: stick the ball to Messi's boot and the deft tricks and touches he deploys in the real world require the same convoluted button-presses as for a League One player.

Also missing are the innovations of the console version: we get none of the new personality simulation, and the game feels less connected with actual teams because of it.

Unpredicta-ball

But these are the exceptions. *FIFA 11* appropriates the uncertainty from real soccer, giving you the thrill of dealing with emergent scenarios. I fired a shot at a keeper who dived to block, the ball apparently sailing into his grasp—just as his defender extended a boot. It bounced up over the keeper's head and into the net for a goal. Pairing that ridiculousness with a viciously good AI keeps games lively.

FIFA 11 is a mildly disappointing Christmas present, but only by comparison to what our younger sibling, Johnny Consolegamer, got in his box. It's still the best game of soccer we've seen on the PC. ■

VERDICT

A smooth, reactive game, *FIFA* is the best option for PC soccer fans, despite some frustrating behavioral issues.

PC GAMER **86**

◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** EA Sports ◆ **Developer** EA Canada
◆ **Multiplayer** 20 players ◆ **Link** www.ea.com/soccer ◆ **ESRB** E

If only all the minigames were this good.

ATTACK OF THE CLONES

STAR WARS: CLONE WARS ADVENTURES

fails to stay on target ***by Josh Augustine***

In a couple of ways, *Star Wars: Clone Wars Adventures* will surprise you with quality beyond what's expected from the typical, inane minigame portal based on a popular children's TV show. Then it will proceed, in many *more* ways, to prove to be exactly what's expected.

Social areas are little more than graphical chat rooms connected to 19 separate minigames. Designing your own room is fun (and free), but the lack of furnishing options quickly feels limiting. Every player I met was courteous, though, and it's certainly a kid-friendly game.

Two of the minigames accessible for free are excellent: Starfighter is a spacefighter tunnel shooter that plays eerily close to how BioWare has described *Star Wars: The Old Republic*'s space combat, and Republic Defender is a surprisingly deep, attractive tower defense game. Their varied missions are fun to play, have some strategy to them, and encourage perfectionists to replay often to try to top the online leaderboards. Plus, the official tie-in with the Cartoon Network animated *Clone Wars* series manifests itself in some admirable ways—recognizable characters and voice actors abound, movie-quality music accompanies every moment and new content (often outfits or droid companions) is released alongside every new TV episode.

Until you pay, though, almost all of the free-to-play content is locked at easy difficulty, which is too simple to give gamers out of grade school any kind of challenge. Once you're roped into the six-dollar per month subscription, you'll find that the quality isn't consistent—most other minigames are uninspired bores, just slightly tweaked versions of popular Flash games with a *Star Wars* paintjob.

I'd love to individually purchase the few standout minigames, including Attack Cruiser—an attractive *Asteroids*-style arcade game. That'd be worth a couple bucks to own outright. But it's subscription-only, and the stinkers that Sony Online's lumped into the package to try to justify a six-dollar monthly fee end up lowering the overall value rather than elevating it.

Only die-hard fans of the show or younger gamers obsessed with *Star Wars* should even consider subscribing for long. Unlock the minigames for a month, get your money's worth, then move along. ■

PC GAMER **54**

◆ **Price** Free; $6/month optional subscription ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** SOE ◆ **Developer** SOE
◆ **Multiplayer** 8 players ◆ **Link** www.clonewarsadventures.com ◆ **ESRB** E

1940s gas tanks are made out of dynamite.

JIMMY'S VENDETTA takes the long, scenic route to action

Despite *Mafia II*'s strong story, it was never the open-world sandbox it wanted us to believe it was. Its first DLC, *Jimmy's Vendetta*, attempts to rectify that by giddily guiding you around the beautiful Empire Bay—which is fantastic fun for the first hour or so.

After that, the problems mount. Most missions have you either stealing a car or purging an area of a rival gang. Before long, you're facing overwhelming hordes of magically spawning foes and driving, repeatedly and tediously, back and forth across town. Pass the cement shoes; it's time to send Jimmy for naptime with the fishes. ■ ***Ryan McCaffrey***

PC GAMER **56**

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Link** www.mafia2game.com ◆ **ESRB** M

Hands off my space-Smurfette girlfriend!

LAIR OF THE SHADOW BROKER is broke, ain't fixed

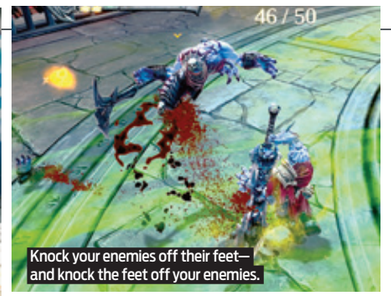
If you romanced the blue alien Liara in *Mass Effect*, you probably weren't impressed with the curt, emotionless reunion with her in *Mass Effect 2*. This DLC gives belated attention to that relationship, and ends the Shadow Broker subplot.

LoTSB is split between Illium, *ME2*'s prettiest sci-fi city, and a spaceship that's almost as impressive. There's a brief chase where you fly a hovercar that would've been exciting except for broken controls and false accusations of losing your target. The rest is combat, brightened by a few funny lines of dialog—but the Shadow Broker himself is a depressingly ordinary boss monster. ■ ***Tom Francis***

PC GAMER **65**

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Link** masseffect.bioware.com ◆ **ESRB** M

I hate when relatives from Hell come to visit.



Knock your enemies off their feet—and knock the feet off your enemies.

Blade Geyser raises the question: Do they give tetanus shots in Hell?

HACKPOCALYPSE

Uptight angels, campy demons and awesome combat are business as usual in **DARKSIDERS** ***by Al Bickham***

Need to know

What is it?
A biblically inspired third-person hack-'n'-slasher

Influenced by
Devil May Cry, God of War

Play it on
Dual-core 2.6GHz CPU, 3GB RAM, GeForce 9800 GTX/ Radeon HD 4870

Alternatively
Devil May Cry 3 (79%)

Copy protection
Steam

War! The growliest of the Four Horseman has been prematurely summoned. In a celestial wrong-number incident with results worthy of a Roland Emmerich/Joss Whedon collaboration, he gets the call to do his thing—pulling the wings off angels and the heads off demons.

The first level of *Darksiders* sees you tear through Heaven and Hell's troops with visceral abandon as the war explodes across a human cityscape. This sets the scene for the game at large: a third-person hack-and-slasher in the *Devil May Cry/God of War* mold. It's plain from the first decapitation that this is a console port; as a PC game, it has some obvious shortcomings, but their impact wanes when the action and the story are as gloriously over-the-top as this.

War has unwittingly lent his might to the armies of Hell (rookie error!) and he's sent back to Earth to restore the balance. What follows is a scintillating blast of action gaming where you crash through some surprisingly large and complex environments to face The Destroyer, Hell's head honcho.

Soul trader

Plucking off limbs, eviscerating bodies and consuming souls with the cheery abandon of a man who truly loves his job is only part of what makes *Darksiders* fun. The game does a fine job of pacing combat with competent, multi-part environmental puzzles. Some are sprawling, and involve lots of back-and-forth over the same ground as you work out what goes where, or carry key items to their destinations. But just as things border on busy-work, you're thrown into some crazy-ass new boss fight, or plunged into a series of challenges requiring specific combat techniques.

Darksiders understands that the feedback loop of hacking and slashing should be fun. But the bane of the console port is the control system. While the WASD-and-mouse basics are nicely attuned, it's clear the combat is built around a gamepad. Some of the attack combinations require alien finger-contortions, and I found myself leveling up my basic attacks for the sake of ease.

Most of the time the camera works fine—until you start using ranged weapons—and then it becomes nothing less than a total mess. Hit Q to go into aim mode, and the mouse switches to control a reticule rather than overall camera movement. There's a sudden feeling of restriction, until the reticule hits the edge of the screen, and the whole camera whirls the view around at breakneck speed. Not so good.

And yet, it's hard not to love. With its great boss battles and well-written characters, *Darksiders* is bombastic, pleasingly unhinged and the combo-hose of swordplay satisfies in a really chunky way. ■

VERDICT

Even iffy controls and a disobedient camera can't quite undo the fun of *Darksiders*' irreverent plot and joyful combat.

PC GAMER **85**

◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** THQ ◆ **Developer** Vigil Entertainment
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.darksiders.com ◆ **ESRB** M

Totec has mastered modern weaponry, but has much to learn about modern pants.

STARCROFT

LARA CROFT AND THE GUARDIAN OF LIGHT

finds light at the end of the tomb ***by Richard Cobbett***

The only thing stopping this from being the best *Tomb Raider* game around is that technically, it isn't one. Yes, Lara's still on the hunt for lost treasure, a one-woman extinction event for giant monsters and uppity ancient gods, but all the actual details have been thrown out to create a very different kind of adventure. The camera is now locked up above; the jumping is fast, fluid and never frustrating; even the shooting is enjoyable.

Co-op is officially *Guardian of Light*'s big selling point, but don't worry if it doesn't interest you. (Annoyingly, it's currently LAN-only.) One player gets to be Lara, while the loser becomes Totec—a spear-hurling personality vacuum—working together to get past the puzzles. In single-player mode, Lara simply gets all the important abilities, like Totec's climbable spears, to herself, with Totec only appearing to deliver silly dialog every so often.

Needless to say, story isn't a priority here, but it's not missed. *GoL* happily and constantly hands you random challenges, from "cross the river without touching the water" to "beat this trap in 30 seconds," but never penalizes you if you skip them. Every map is similarly littered with collectibles, power-ups and bonus challenge tombs where the game's trickiest challenges await. You could ignore them and just get to the ending in three or four hours, but you'd be missing the point.

Mechanically, the game is close to perfect. There are points where the puzzles go on a bit too long, and while there's variety in the levels, there's not *quite* enough to completely avoid monotony, but these are minor issues at their absolute worst. For the most part, the action has a wonderful weight to it, whether you're using bombs to launch giant stone balls onto pedestals for a bonus achievement or flipping around mazes of exploding poisonous plants. Above all else, it plays fair, never having you make deadly leaps into the unknown and offering checkpoints that rarely kick you back more than a few seconds for screwing up.

Guardian of Light might look like a dumbed-down spin-off, but it's not. It's a superb game in its own right, and all the better for focusing on fun over scale or sex appeal. It's easily Lara's best in ages. ■

PC GAMER **87**

◆ **Price** $15 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Square Enix ◆ **Developer** Crystal Dynamics ◆ **Link** http://bit.ly/lcroft ◆ **ESRB** T

PC GAMER

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalizing the review. We review each game on its own merits and match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The primary aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review paid-for content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice, even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, could a been a contender.

76-89% Good
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice
A glowing example within its genre of excellence in design and execution.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★
A game scoring 80% or more is eligible to receive the PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

PC Gamer's 10 Latest and Greatest

Sid Meier's Civilization V (93%)
November '10

StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty (93%)
November '10

Monkey Island 2 SE (90%)
October '10

Sleep is Death (90%)
July '10

LOVE (86%)
July '10

Dawn of War II: Chaos Rising (91%)
May '10

Mass Effect 2 (90%)
March '10

BioShock 2 (90%)
March '10

Left 4 Dead 2 (92%)
January '10

Dragon Age: Origins (92%)
Holiday '09

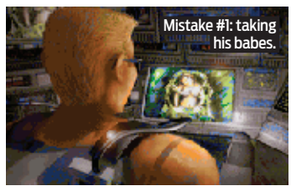
REINSTALL

CLASSICS OF PC GAMING REVISITED

From "Life is like a box of ammo" to "I ain't afraid of no quake!" Duke's rummaged around in our collective subconscious for his riffs.

Duke Nukem 3D

"NOBODY STEALS OUR CHICKS...AND LIVES!" *by Chris Comiskey*


Mistake #1: taking his babes.

Here's an average five minutes in the boots of gaming's testosteroniest action hero: jetpacking around a football stadium, deploying holographic decoys of yourself, chucking RPGs and pipe bombs at a cyclopean giant that has missile launchers for hands. After toppling the monstrosity, you punt its giant eye through a pair of uprights. Then, you get it on with a harem of blondes and brunettes.

Duke Nukem 3D is still gaming's best popcorn shooter, and revisiting it reminds us of how seriously FPSes have taken themselves since. Its competition in the '90s had space stations, generic caves and Nazi castles—*Duke 3D* has XXX movie stores and filthy, usable bathrooms (OK, *Duke* also has space stations, but they're filled with half-naked babes strapped to alien monoliths). Duke even visits a seismically unstable Grand Canyon, a poisoned river and a hot lava waterfall. As you climb through the jagged overpasses, the landscape can crumble—rerouting your course entirely. Pawing the walls within levels reveals hidden pop culture refereces like an eviscerated *Doom* Marine, an impaled Indiana Jones and a dangling, legless Luke Skywalker.

Duke is built off its little—and often morally questionable—details. Murdering a reptilian Enforcer sometimes results in its carcass leaving a pile of poop behind. If you stepped in it, Duke might exclaim: "Sh*t happens." Marching over a dead body leaves bloody footprints on the floor. You can toss hundred dollar bills at dancing harlots, and they'll jiggle their pixilated boobs at you. Then, you can recover your money by unloading your chain gun into their defenseless, Benjamin-stuffed bikinis.

Those novel, tasteless touches captivated *3D*'s audience in '96, especially those of us that were still in our teens at the time. And looking back, we may not have fully appreciated all the freedom *Duke* lent us. Much of that came from a vast inventory; everyone made use of *Duke*'s insane equipment differently. You have a gun that shrinks aliens into pear-sized pygmies, perfect for crushing under Duke's size 13s. Your laser trip mines stick to any surface. There's a weapon that freezes foes solid—if you ice aliens in the air, they'll fall and shatter into a pile of cubes. The game lets you kick monsters in the face while *simultaneously* shotgunning them. 3D Realms wanted players to indulge—*Duke*'s jetpack may be the best example of that. It isn't a tool for solving puzzles, but a playful means of floating through *Duke*'s (at the time) massive levels and levying some death from above.

My time-tested tactic is still deploying the Holoduke (a projected body-double that lured enemies to its location) just outside of an alien-infested entrance, scattering a few pipe bombs, opening the doors and juicing up on steroids for temporary Velociraptor-like speed. I'd then sprint to a safe distance and let the bad guys swarm around my Duke decoy. When enough aliens took the bait, I'd whip out my doubled-barreled rocket launcher—the Devastator—and spit a volley at the swarm. I'd cackle from afar as my rockets detonated with the pipe bombs, messily disconnecting the xenomorph torsos. If I bagged enough bodies, Duke's gruff, baritone voice would respond with one of his many catchphrases, such as: "Your face, your ass—what's the difference?"

Duke's abrasive misogyny was a middle finger to the silent, faceless protagonist. His ego permeates the game's action; for each weapon picked up, each alien shredded and each stripper ogled—you'd hear a corresponding quip. When Duke dispatches the second episode's final boss, he whistles casually, discards the monster's skull, drops his pants, sits down, unfolds a newspaper and literally utilizes the alien's tattered throat as a porta potty.

Like *Doom*, *Duke 3D* is completely playable thanks to the way blazing player movement speed pairs with expressive weapons in a sprite-based 3D engine. Unlike *Doom*, *3D*'s bravado makes Duke one of PC gaming's crassest and cherished characters. ■

Most baddies "melted" into a pile of pixels—a creative response to engine limitations.

Looking back, we may not have fully appreciated all the freedom Duke lent us.

READ ME

RELEASE DATE
January, 1996

PUBLISHER
GT Interactive

DEVELOPER
3D Realms / Apogee Software

WHAT WE SAID THEN
"If you've been disappointed by countless *Doom*-clones and want real satisfaction, you simply can't go wrong with *Duke Nukem 3D*."
93%, July 1996

OTHER 1996 GAMES WE LOVED
Quake (90%)
Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall (90%)
Civilization II (97%)

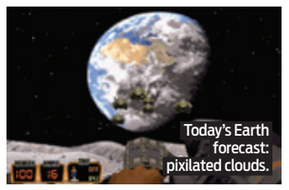
QUICK THOUGHTS

WHAT'S YOUR FONDEST MEMORY OF *DUKE NUKEM 3D*?

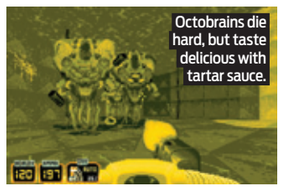
EVAN
"Careless jetpacking; spending way too much time in bathrooms; mining for secret strippers."

DAN
"Duke had some very memorable weapons and rewarding kills, like the freezing-and-smash and the shrink-and-squish."

LOGAN
"Finding the bridge of the Enterprise and Picard's ready room! 'Hey, who's got the spray paint?'"


Today's Earth forecast: pixilated clouds.

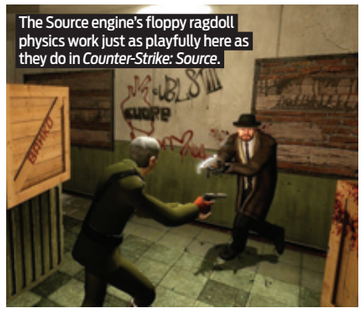
In the future, motherboards are used as wallpaper.


Octobrains die hard, but taste delicious with tartar sauce.

If it's automatic, why do I need to punch it?

This is what James Bond looks like when you want to avoid lawsuits for using Pierce Brosnan's likeness.

Return to a time before EXP and unlockables.


The Source engine's floppy ragdoll physics work just as playfully here as they do in *Counter-Strike: Source*.

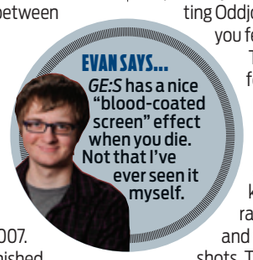
Popping the hat off Baron Samedi (aka the Chef Boyardee of the Carribbean) is still fun.

1 License to kill

MOD WHY AREN'T YOU PLAYING **GOLDENEYE: SOURCE** YET?

Go ahead—it's OK. It won't tarnish your PC gaming cred to admit that you loved *GoldenEye 007* on the Nintendo 64. We all did. Rare's first-person shooter was an extraordinary classic, mostly for its playability on a friend-packed couch.

Sadly, tedious legal wrangling between Nintendo, Microsoft, Rare and Activision for the rights to *GoldenEye* has left fans of the series in a decade-long drought. Only now is Activision finally producing a follow-up on the Wii, but the PC's impatient modding community is years ahead of that project: *GoldenEye: Source* has been available since 2007. They call it a "beta," but it's felt finished to me for more than a year—its creators are just perfectionists to an incredible degree.



Today, *GE:S* is the best it's ever been, and I can't believe there aren't more people playing it. Wandering through the silver corridors of my favorite map, Stack, is genuinely more fun than it was in the '97 original—turning a corner with the lethal Golden Gun in-hand as a signature Bond theme melody stirs up the drama (the soundtrack is top-grade and available for free at http://.bit.ly/bondsoundtrack), then snap-shotting Oddjob in the ass as he's fleeing makes you feel like a bullet wizard.

The original mechanics (with a few careful improvements by the mod team) absolutely hold up—there's a weird oscillation between tense, slow stalking of other players (there's no sprint key) that abruptly transitions into rapid strafing, frantic left-clicking and slide-crouching to avoid headshots. This pace is welcome refuge from sprint-die-sprint-die meat grinders like *Medal of Honor* and *Modern Warfare 2*.

And somehow, 90-some percent of the content from the original game (other than single-player, of course) is here, completely intact. The Facility, Library, Caverns and Egyptian maps are inch-for-inch replications of the originals. There's paintball mode. The hidden passageways on Complex work. Every gun retains its specific nuance—grenade launchers have a minimum range, the Klobb SMG is still useless and pistols present a sensation of marksmanship that I don't get in any other shooter.

GE:S is one of the most faithful high-fidelity remakes I've ever played, and it does it without compromising playability for fan service. The best servers (I recommend WNx WarriorNation's Chicago server at 208.100.45.111:27015) rotate between a huge spectrum of gametypes. One round might be team-based, one-shot-you're-dead License To Kill mode with throwing knives only, and the next a rousing round of, say, the *Counter-Strike*-style Gun Game, where you earn new weapons by killing with your current one. Bond's movies may be on ice for now, but on the PC he's as hot as ever. **Evan Lahti**

SIZE 893MB LINK www.goldeneyesource.net

2 Glock-climbing

MODS GIVE **L4D** A BIT MORE LIFE WITH **I HATE MOUNTAINS**

I Hate Mountains doesn't break *Left 4 Dead*'s mold of co-op zombie genocide, but it does stress it a bit. While *L4D*'s map design typically takes you down a single main avenue to the coveted, concrete security blanket known as your safe house, *I Hate Mountains* builds in multiple escape routes of equal length.

The result feels like a polished, proper follow-up to the existing campaigns; too often, *L4D* modders get over-ambitious, constructing elaborate lighthouses or *Lord of the Rings*-inspired survival maps to kill zombies in. But these high-concept areas rarely suit the balance for the zombie spawning and the abilities of the boss infected. *Mountains* understands the pacing of *L4D*, and the confusion caused by its multiple paths is organically unsettling, contributing just enough tension without making your playthrough feel like a frustrating zombie maze.

A handful of original lines from the game's voice cast make an appearance, too. And if you prefer proper melee weapons, the mod team is also working on porting the campaign to *L4D2*. **Andy Salisbury**

SIZE 267MB LINK www.ihatemountains.com

You'll get lost, but expert zombie-slayers will revel in the misdirection.

3 FREE FUN

HAPPY WHEELS

VIRTUAL BLOOD IS *ALWAYS* SATISFYING

Flash games generally feature one of three things: gratuitous amounts of blood, terrible music that's far too loud or some form of racing. *Happy Wheels* has all three.

Happy Wheels puts you in the seat of a hobo's jet-enhanced wheelchair (or one of many other playable characters and their associated vehicle), as he pilots his way through different obstacle courses that guarantee his demise. There's absolutely no shortage of danger-filled circuits, either; *Happy Wheels* even features a level editor that pain gluttons can use to create their own suicidal stages.

If you're the competitive type, challenge your friends to a time trial via replays. Truck your way through a level as fast as you can and send your closest group of buddies the summary. **AS**

SIZE Browser-based
LINK http://bit.ly/HappyWheels

"Hold on, I got this."

MACHINIMA

This choose-your-own adventure YouTube video remembers ***World of Warcraft***'s hardest dragon

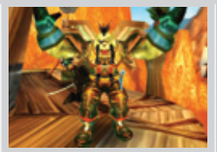
WoW used to make you run a long list of quests to reach Onyxia. It's since been patched out, but this choose-your-own-adventure series lets you relive the glory without the travel time. **AS** *http://bit.ly/Onyxia*

Honesty is key

1 I remember this quest well—it was grueling, but it can't be nearly as tough as I remember, can it? I dismiss the warning and forge ahead.

Get started

2 The video gives me two colored boxes. Blue gives me a chance to back out and reject the quest, but I want to slay a dragon. Green it is!



ACCEPT!

3 Let's get started! Using the same choose-your-own adventure format, I form a simulated group and make my way to the boss.

Failure

4 We lose a party member, but the group continues—and wipes. Noooooo! That's the last time I fall for your dirty tricks, nostalgia.

Kill aliens in exciting new settings

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Moderate
TIME Three hours

VITAL LINKS

The Valve developer wiki
http://bit.ly/9A2OrU

Comprehensive guide to creating tiles in Hammer
http://bit.ly/cDYBHd

The heart of the *AS* mod scene
www.swarmarmory.com

FPSBanana's *Alien Swarm* section
http://bit.ly/cTfwNz

PHILL CAMERON CREATES NEW **ALIEN SWARM** MAPS IN THE TILEGEN

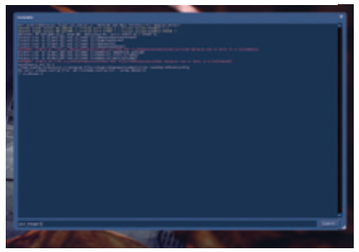
Alien Swarm, as well as being free, fun and xenomorph-heavy, has a new piece of development software from Valve packaged with it: the TileGen.

The idea behind the TileGen is to have a quick way to lay out maps using basic tile pieces to speedily create levels without having to master Hammer, the 3D level editor for the Source engine.

It can even create entire randomly generated levels for you in seconds, provided that you give it a few parameters, such as specific rooms to include and so forth. In other words, while *Alien Swarm* only came with a single campaign, the possibility for there to be many, many more is just a few clicks away.

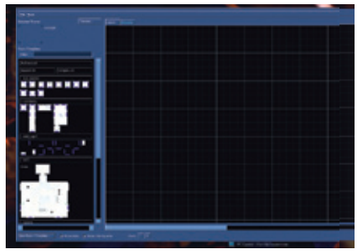
More than just providing a way to quickly put a level together, the TileGen is a stepping stone, enabling us to quickly create an overall layout before graduating to the much more powerful Hammer tool to touch it up and improve on it.

There's always the concern that this sort of creative convenience is just going to lead to a bunch of sub-standard, cookie-cutter levels. We must fight this. Or, more precisely, *you* must fight this, by creating torturous, atmospheric and original levels that give other fledgling level designers something to aspire to.



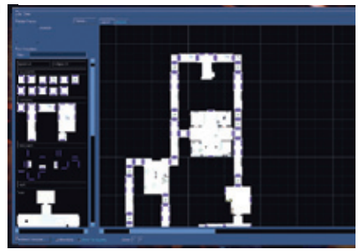
1 Straight to the Source

Despite being a relatively user-friendly tool, the TileGen is well hidden within *Alien Swarm*, requiring a few bits of jiggery-pokery to get it up and running. First, you need to enable the developer's console in the options. Open it with the tilde (~), and then type **sv_cheats 1**. Follow up with **asw_tilegen**, and boom, something big and creative-like just filled up your screen, full of scary graphs, odd blocks and strange buttons.



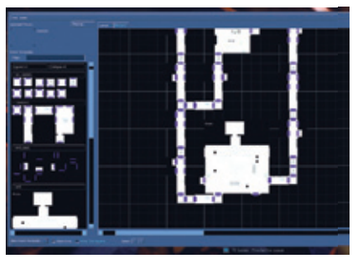
2 Dungeons & doodles

While it might look like graph paper, the only thing the TileGen shares with your math lessons is that you're doodling a level—except this time it's not for *D&D* and you're not going to get a disappointing grade on the final exam and end up at that second-rate university. Select a theme on the left where you've got your tiles. Taking up pretty much the rest of the screen is your level. Grab a tile and place it on the graph with a left click. Simple.



3 Laying out the layout

The first thing you need to do is select a starting point, which comes in the form of a handy single tile at the bottom of the examples theme set. It has multiple exits, meaning you can branch off in any direction you like, using corridors, rooms and linking pieces to create an intricate web of action and tension. Or you could just make one super-long corridor and call it The Gauntlet. We're not doing that.

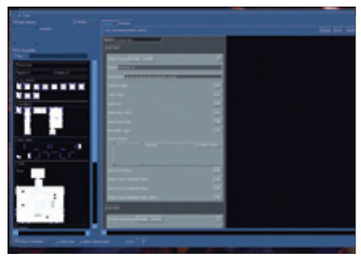


4 Mastering tension

While you could just throw together any jumble of rooms, it's useful to keep some idea in the back of your mind of the experience you want to create. Branching paths, crescendos and finales are all important, and should be in your map. Also, don't forget to cap every exit not in use, unless you want to constantly terrify your players with glimpses of the void. Just grab a cap tile and pop it over every exit that leads to nowhere.

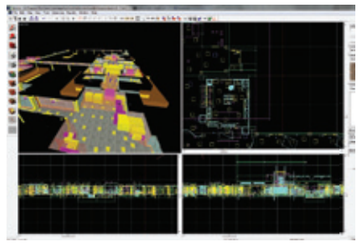
5 Giving it a once-over

Once you're happy with the general layout of your level, you can give it a quick run-through to make sure it plays OK by selecting "Export to VMF and Play." If you're either too scared or too lazy to fight off the swarm by yourself, you can select the much less macho "Export to VMF and Play Without Aliens" option. Figure out what's confusing, what needs to be replaced and what's just plain bad, and fix it.



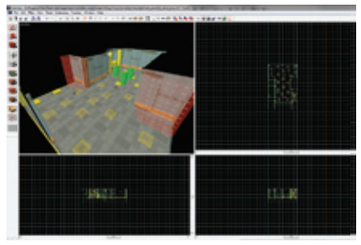
6 Chaos rules

Instead of creating an entire mission by hand, you can have fun messing around with various rules and values detailed in the second tab of the TileGen, and let it create a mission for you based on those rules. Pick a theme, either "dev" or "example," and let it generate a map out of pure ether and only the most confusing of creation parameters. There's even a "seed" number to input, as if things weren't random enough already.



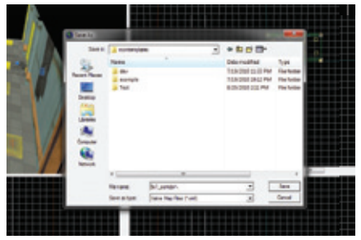
7 It's Hammer time

Under "File," select "Export VMF" once you've got your layout figured out, and that will save your level in a format that Hammer can read. From there, it's just a case of loading up Hammer and opening your nascent level (it should be under alien swarm/swarm/maps). Provided that you roughly know your way around Hammer, you can use it to modify and create objects, swap textures and generally touch up the whole place.



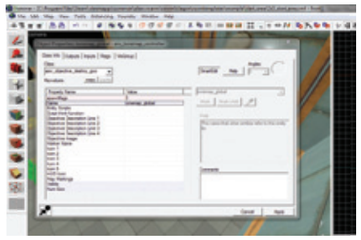
8 Hammering out a tile

The example theme set will only get you so far. If you don't want to get sick of the same dreary bits of blood splatter every time you play, at some point you're going to have to wade into Hammer to make your own tiles. You can either edit the current tiles into something more varied and interesting, or make new tiles entirely from scratch. It's easy enough with some basic Hammer know-how: see Vital Links for a useful online guide.



9 Importing tiles

Once you've finished customizing your go-to corridor tile in Hammer, you have to save it as a VMF into a theme folder (located at alien swarm\swarm\tilegen\roomtemplates). Once you've done that, and named it something like "5x1 Corridor," it should show up in the TileGen next time you start. It's like some kind of witchcraft. If you have patience, you could create an entirely new theme, then use the TileGen to create levels for it on the fly.



10 Messing with missions

Not only does making new tiles enable you to introduce some variety to your TileGen project, but it also means that you can create new mission types instead of the simple "Destroy 11 Eggs/100 Swarm" that come as standard. This is also straightforward: you need to create a start tile with "Mission Entities," and you can then use that tile to create a new mission type next time you generate a layout with the TileGen.

11 What's in a name?

No map is finished without a name. Look at the layout. Look deep into it, until it gazes back at you, and figure out what on Earth it evokes. Lots of branching paths from a single source, heading back towards the exit? Maybe you could call it "Double-Helix," to impress everyone. Or "We All Died At Breakaway Station." Or you could go with some sort of genero-title along the lines of "Desperation," or even "Planet 51."

12 Alien smarm

This is it: the all-important opening night. Sure, you've played during the testing phase, but now you've roped in some friends, forced them to download the VMF, and finally you're playing your level as *Alien Swarm* was meant to be played: with a bunch of friends all swearing at each other as the guns fire, the space parasites chew through everyone and the Tech Marine tries to figure out how the hell the hacking works. Relish it!

SKILLS

FIRE CARS FROM YOUR GUN IN *GTA IV*

GIVE NIKO A GRAVITY GUN

1 Update your game, then grab the tool you need to load mods: an ASI loader (*http://bit.ly/asiloader*). Find your *GTA* folder (search for GTAIV.exe), then extract the archive you just downloaded to there. If you can't open RAR files, Google IZarc.

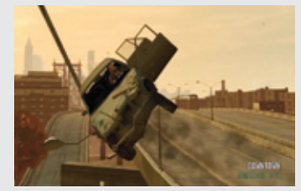
2 The mod itself is modestly called Simple Trainer—grab it from *http://bit.ly/gtatrainer* and extract all the files to your *GTA IV* folder (same as above). Now fire up the game and press Right Ctrl + J to enable the Gravity Gun.

3 Simple Trainer does much, much more than this. See this post by its creator for a full list of its functions, and how to install it on *Episodes from Liberty City*: *http://bit.ly/trainertraining*. Scroll down a bit or search for "List of options."

BONUS SKILL

OTHER TRICKS

Hit] to insanely speed up your car, Tab to save anywhere and Right Ctrl + F7 to turn into someone else.



The Hard Stuff

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

TESTED

Origin Genesis

Origin PC; $5,699

I stopped paying for expensive haircuts long before I developed a bald spot on the top of my head. I guess I realized that haircuts can only get so good, and after that, I was just paying for a nice location in a crime-free neighborhood and French Roast instead of tap water while I waited.

This is what bothers me about the Genesis from Origin, a dazzling beast of a gaming rig that any gamer would be lucky to own. Despite its speed, fine design and groovy watercooling, it's got a price that tells me I'm buying French Roast instead of frames per second.

Let me be clear: I get what Origin's doing here. It didn't just toss a fancy-lad third-party watercooling kit into the case and call it a day. Instead, the twin GTX 480s (each packing 1.5GB of memory) are stripped down to slabs a mere three-quarters of an inch high and outfitted with a beautiful custom waterblocks that pump liquid the color of Red Vines over the cores. The Core i7-980X processor gets the same treatment, which makes possible the overclock from 3.33GHz to 4.4GHz—a speed that should generate enough heat to fry eggs *at a distance*.

There's a whole lot of pretty here inside and out, but beauty ain't cheap.

If I'd had an Origin system at home during this week's heat wave, I might have been able to play games and watch Blu-ray movies instead of watching my chipset overheat and shut the rig down. The sophisticated cooling no doubt contributes to the bulletproof stability, but it's strange that the Genesis isn't particularly quiet (although you can halve the noise via a set of front-mounted knobs).

On top of a 1TB hard drive, you also get two 50GB OCZ Vertex 2 solid-state drives in RAID 0 config (so they appear and function as a single 100GB drive) with TRIM support (if you use Windows 7, don't buy an SSD without this feature—it prevents performance degradation over time). Origin also throws in Creative's Sound Blaster X-Fi Titanium soundcard, and ships every-thing in a humungous crate—all I need now is a crowbar and a goatee!

Speed that should generate enough heat to fry eggs *at a distance*.

Where the party comes to a screeching halt, however, is the price. It's not that the rig isn't worth it (the watercooling alone might have justified the entire PC during that heat wave). It's just that I've seen machines—just last month, in fact—deliver virtually the same performance at almost two-thirds the price (and with a far more extensive warranty).

I'm sold on Origin's craftsmanship, style and smarts—I just don't see the payoff in this particular configuration for this terrifying price. If I had the money I might go for it, but as it is, I'm just an average Joe with a bald spot who plays *Scrabble* during a heat wave. ■ ***Logan Decker***

SPEC ◆ **CPU** Core i7-980X OC'd to 4.4GHz ◆ **RAM** 6GB DDR3 ◆ **GPU** GeForce GTX 480 (x2) ◆ **Storage** 50GB SSD w/TRIM (x2), 1TB 7,200RPM HD ◆ **3DMark06/Vantage** 30,742/P41,739 ◆ **Crysis** 98fps (1680x1050) ◆ **SupCom** 60fps ◆ www.originpc.com

VERDICT

Another magnificent rig from a vendor in top form—but in this case, the benchmark numbers don't quite track with the lofty price.

PC GAMER **83**

TESTED

Headset Heavies

Detach, retract, collapse, vibrate and go no-strings-attached *by Chris Comiskey*

Quickie headset tips

Follow these two easy steps to squeeze the most out of your headset's performance

1 If you've got a 2.1 headset, *don't* set your soundcard or onboard audio to 5.1 or 7.1. The reverse is also true, so if you've got a 5.1 headset, make sure it's configured correctly. In Windows 7, go to Control Panel > Sound > Playback tab. Then click Configure, and select the setup that matches your device. If you have a soundcard, you'll need to do this through its specific control panel as well (refer to your soundcard's documentation to do so).

2 You can set up a driver-based USB headset (like the Logitech G930s) and switch between those and your speakers whenever you want. Install the headset USB drivers first. Then, In Windows 7, navigate to Control Panel > Sound > Playback tab. Right-click on the icon that represents the audio device that you want to use and click "Select as Default Device." To switch back, just navigate back to the playback tab and set a different audio device as default.

Specialist *Nox*

Ear cozies

If the ability to pack up and go at a moment's notice with the least amount of baggage is at the top of your list—maybe you haven't paid the rent in a while—there's simply no contest here. The Specialist weighs less than five ounces, collapses flat into a CD-sized protective case, and actually sounds quite good. It's not spartan, either, with terrific features that include a very high-quality retractable mic (particularly awesome in voice chat) and a volume control on the right side of the cups that's a snap to use without looking—and extra-plushy pads make the set wonderfully comfortable to wear even for hours at a time.

Given the very compact size and the relatively low price of the Specialist, you're probably inclined to be suspicious about the audio quality. But while the headset doesn't serve up the spacial separation or clarity of headsets twice its size and price, it's still terrific for gamers (but less so for music fans who might bristle at the screechiness of higher frequencies).

PC GAMER **83**

$80 ◆ www.nox-audio.com ◆ Category: Dream

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

7H *Steelseries*

Brawny, brutish, built to last

These cans are made to last. Built off a thick, hard-molded plastic frame that easily snaps into three pieces for packing, they'll brush off drops, tumbles and errant carry-on smashings. And they've got that full, sweet signature SteelSeries sound; the best sound across games, music and movies. Despite the 2.1 drivers, they sound closer to 5.1s to me: While playing through *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, demonic gurglings seemed to emanate from all directions.

Along with sturdiness, sound and portability, there are plenty of other features to soften the blow of the price, including interchangeable cloth and leather earcups, a fully retractable mic and a braided cable. But despite (or maybe because of) the sturdy construction, the 7Hs clamp down on your head with the bite strength of a vicious pit bull—they're headache makers, even after a paltry hour's use. You might want to pair these up with a mannequin's head to stretch them out a bit before use. They're worth the trouble.

PC GAMER **90**

$130 ($150, USB version) ◆ www.steelseries.com ◆ Category: Dream

Rude-100 *Rude Gamewear*

Shake, rattle and roll

There's a hell of a lot going on here for $50, even though every feature of the Rude-100s seems to have been designed with an equal and opposite un-feature.

The sound, for example, is quite good in games, able to deliver much of the fine detail that other inexpensive sets tend to lose, and serves admirably for music and movies as well—as long as you don't crank the volume too high. The headset is light and sits comfortably over the dome, but the thin fabric of the speaker drivers lays flat against your ears and gets itchy after 30 minutes or so. The mic is a particularly suprising bonus, delivering dazzlingly clear voice quality, but the kumquat-sized baffle is a ridiculous visual distraction when gaming. And then there are the USB-powered vibration effects that can be dialed up via the inline volume control. These effects can be intense when you're playing scary games, but with this set they mostly come off as rattly annoyances, like having a couple cell phones go off every now and then in each ear.

PC GAMER **68**

$50 ◆ www.rudegamewear.com ◆ Category: Mid

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

WIRELESS

G930 *Logitech*

Walk-around surround sound

This is the first time I've ever been positively floored by such precise positional sound outside of a home theater. With the 7.1 Dolby surround turned on, you'll hear distant gunshots and howling winds *outside of your head*. I had to make sure my external rear surround speakers were in fact turned off: it's *that* convincing. And I swear Logitech somehow mashed a full-sized subwoofer inside these things—when jeeps blow up in *Far Cry 2*, you'll *feel* the shockwaves rumble.

While it does weigh a ton, the soft memory foam cushions feel like angels kissing your ears. And once you taste the freedom of wireless, you'll never go back—you won't even take the G930s off when you go the bathroom (especially not on a cold night). Nine hours of battery life means that they'll require a daily charge at most. You do need to install drivers to get 7.1 sound and voice mods working, but it's a cinch to do so. If not for the telephone-quality mic and the noticeable heft, these would be damn near perfect.

PC GAMER **95**

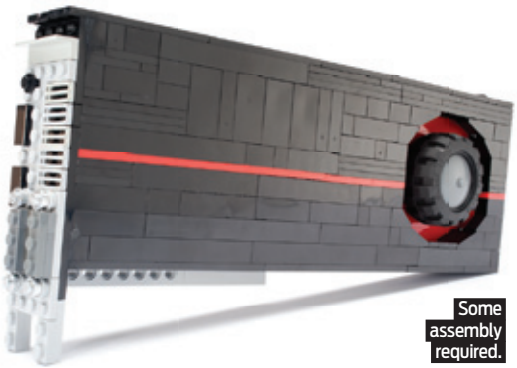
$160 ◆ www.logitech.com ◆ Category: Dream

TESTED

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

LEGO 3D Accelerator

Doug Joerres



Some assembly required.

Two of mankind's towering achievements—3D accelerators and LEGOs—come together in this one-of-a-kind creation by *PC Gamer* reader Doug Joerres for the discerning gamer. Observe the meticulous design. Note the clean lines and the subtle visual cues along the connector panel (the card includes twin DVI connectors and a VGA-to-DVI adapter as well as S-Video and component-out).

Who cares about performance anyway? It's a LEGO GPU.

What it does not include, however, is performance. In fact, the LEGO 3D Accelerator had the dubious distinction of failing to run *any* of my benchmarks. That's zero frames per second in *Crysis*, zero in *Supreme Commander* (despite the hexa-core processor in my test system) and zero in everything else. In fact, it wouldn't even run 2D games. Not even MAME.

On the other hand, the card runs extremely cool and consumes no power whatsoever. And who cares about performance anyway? It's a LEGO GPU. Those two words put together merit an Editor's Choice award in my book, missing out on a perfect 100 percent verdict only because you can't actually buy one. That's too bad, because this videocard this may be the only GPU on Earth worthy of *PC Gamer*'s own contribution to gaming culture: *Gravy Trader*. **LD**

PC GAMER 99

Display mates.

Q&A

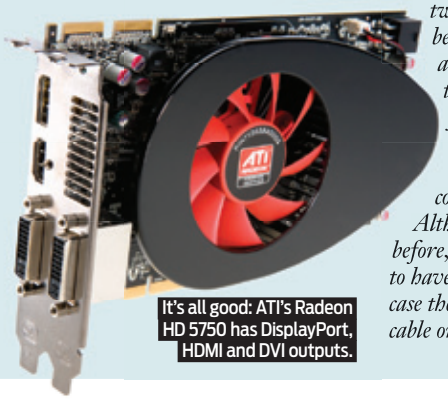
Conjunction Junction

Q: I bought a Radeon HD 5750, and my next upgrade's going to be a 24-inch display. My current display is DVI only—should I buy a display that supports HDMI or DisplayPort? Which one is better?

A: *For the sake of versatility, it's always good to have a display that supports as many connection options as the manufacturer could squeeze into the rump of the chassis. That said, you'll probably only ever use one of them.*

DVI is the most common connector these days, but its major disadvantages are that it doesn't carry sound or support HDCP (High Bandwidth Digital Content Protection, which allows you to view commercial, copy protected Blu-ray discs at their full resolution), and you need a special "dual-link" cable to play at the luxurious resolution of 2560x1600. (Note that while HDMI 1.3 supports 2560x1600, I don't know of any display that supports this resolution over HDMI; that sucks, but if you're looking for a 24-inch display, it's probably not a concern for you.)

HDMI is a proprietary standard designed for home entertainment systems, while DisplayPort is a royalty-free standard geared more towards PCs and PC hardware. But the differences between these designs are more significant to IT professionals than consumers or gamers. HDMI and DisplayPort both deliver sound and video through the same cable and both support HDCP. And you won't find any significant quality differences between the two, or even between them and DVI, for that matter. So you'll be fine with any one of these three connections.



It's all good: ATI's Radeon HD 5750 has DisplayPort, HDMI and DVI outputs.

Although, as I said before, it's always nice to have the option, in case the dog chews one cable or the other. **LD**

Hard Stuff Trinity

DREAM SYSTEM		MID-RANGE		ENTRY-LEVEL	
CASE/PSU Antec DF-85, 850W Corsair PSU	$280	**CASE/PSU** CM HAF 922, 750W Corsair PSU	$200	**CASE/PSU** Generic Case, Antec Earthwatts 500W PSU	$130
PROCESSOR Intel Core i7-960 3.2GHz	$570	**PROCESSOR** Intel Core i7-860 2.93GHz	$280	**PROCESSOR** AMD Athlon II X2 245 2.9GHz	$57
MOTHERBOARD MSI Big Bang-XPower	$280	**MOTHERBOARD** Asus P7P55D-E Pro	$180	**MOTHERBOARD** ASUS M4A88TD	$99
MEMORY Corsair 6GB DDR3-1600	$150	**MEMORY** Corsair 4GB DDR3/1333	$99	**MEMORY** Crucial 2GB DDR3/1333	$44
OPTICAL DRIVE Plextor B940-SA Blu-Ray Burner	$199	**OPTICAL DRIVE** Lite-On iHAS424-98	$24	**OPTICAL DRIVE** Lite-On iHAS424-98	$24
HARD DRIVE Corsair F60 60GB SSD, WD 1TB Caviar Black	$255	**HARD DRIVE** Corsair F60 60GB SSD, WD 1TB Caviar Black	$255	**HARD DRIVE** WD 750GB Caviar Black	$70
SOUNDCARD Creative Labs X-Fi Titanium	$130	**SOUNDCARD** Onboard	$0	**SOUNDCARD** Onboard	$0
VIDEOCARD Radeon HD 5970	$700	**VIDEOCARD** EVGA GeForce GTX 470 SC	$350	**VIDEOCARD** Radeon HD 5670	$80
TOTAL PRICE	**$2,564**	**TOTAL PRICE**	**$1,388**	**TOTAL PRICE**	**$504**

MEDAL OF HONOR
The Book

The Pre-Order Bonus
Exclusively For Barnes & Noble Customers

by
SAS Action Hero
Gunny McHeadshot

Chapter One

Sky. That was all I could see. I tried to look around, see where I was, or even if I was still in one piece. But however hard I tried to look down, I saw only sky. I'd been in Afghanistan precisely 23 seconds, dropped deep behind enemy lines as part of operation Lima Oscar Lima, and one thing was crystal clear: my mouse was inverted.

I fixed it in Options > Controls > Mouse and keyboard, turned the sensitivity down to 3/10, and moved out.

Contact. I saw Megamen66 [NL] go down to an angry burst of PKM fire, and looked up to see a Taliban insurgent with SIBERIANDINGO emblazoned in orange above his head. I didn't have time to think, I just clicked. He went down in a spray of blood and +10 bonuses: REVENGE KILL, a part of me thought.

I reloaded. I'd only spent six rounds, but if my tutorial taught me anything, it's that all the unspent bullets will somehow magically transfer to my new clips.

Contact. I clenched my teeth and clicked the mouse. ZarDoZ took a spray of 5.56 mm to the chest. +5 HEADSHOT, I reflected.

Contact. I clicked instinctively. [DDoS] NOT THE BEEZ!! went down. +10 SAVIOR KILL, his death scream seemed to say.

Contact. I clicked remorselessly. Thehyperduck went down. +10 ENEMY KILL, I thought redundantly.

I reloaded.

Contact.

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